Grad school doesn’t come cheap, and neither do the cinnamon twists at the Taco Bell on Commonwealth Ave. As the costs of living and studying and fast-food splurging continue to rise, economists tell us that wages remain stagnant. With rents ballooning and loans mounting, most of us on staff at the Comment feel somewhat on edge.

With this on our minds, we chose “On the Edge” as our theme for this issue. We sought those who, by circumstance or by choice, find themselves living on the edge. We also explore stories in which our subjects have created their own versions of a separate peace in a world of private armies and private equity gone haywire.

Margaret Hartmann discovers fiction *noir* in America’s underbelly in “Word on the Street.” While not for the prudish or politically correct, these true-crime stories from the “street lit” canon are surging in popularity. Identity politics and questions of faith come to the fore as Chelsey Philpot charts the polarized landscape occupied by divinity-school students in “Finding Their Religion.”

Christian Holland’s “Men of the Bloc” examines group survival, tracking two leaders of a Russian immigrant voting bloc who wield influence—some say undue—at Boston’s City Hall. And in “A Game Too Human,” Jenna Beck chronicles the quest to make computers think like people do, as programmers work to create a machine smart enough to win at the ancient game of Go.

Anna Derryberry considers how twelve directorial visions can forge a single whole in “Devils and Doppelgängers,” an inside look at a film project. Upstart director Aviv Rubinstein reports from the Lausanne Underground Film and Music Festival in “Swiss Account.” Rubinstein also contributes “Hip Replacement,” a memoir of “coming out” as a hipster to his parents.

Carolyn R. Saraspi’s “Too Long a Wait” tells the story of her uncle, who eventually lost hope after a long struggle with America’s immigration bureaucracy. Shrutí Garodia confronts a different kind of inertia in “Home Truths,” a story of family conflict in her native India. Brooklyn-based artist Angela Dufresne deals with relatives in her own peculiar way, and critics have taken notice. Travis Andersen writes about her process in “Scene Stealer.” Rashmi Alevoor’s “Foxx Trot” captures another artist, DJ Julian Wadsworth, who works in the audio sphere.

We found ourselves living vicariously through many of these subjects. And sure, we may never stand on a street corner dressed in cow costumes. We may never get Harvard MDiv’s, screen films abroad or control political destinies. But we’ve enjoyed hearing from those who have.

We hope you will too.

Travis Andersen
Christian Holland
Student Editors
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It’s hard to think of a bookstore as a good place for a fight. Yet in a sparsely populated enclave of a Borders bookstore in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a battle is taking place on the shelves under a placard marked “African-American Literature.”

Several copies of The Color Purple reside here, “Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award” etched on their jackets. Squeezed beside them is a novel titled Doing His Time (Who Said Dating a Baller Was Easy?) whose cover features a woman with oversized sunglasses, gold earrings the circumference of a coffee mug, and a shirt opened to reveal her bra. Stationed nearby, flanking Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, is One G-String Short of Crazy and, filed under “E,” a book by rapper 50 Cent.

On an adjacent shelf sits The Coldest Winter Ever, with a relatively mundane cover except for the label “#1 author of the hip-hop generation.” It begins: I never liked Sister Souljah, straight up. She the type of female I’d like to cut in the face with my razor. Before I get heated just talking about her, let me make it clear who I am and where I stand. Don’t go jumping to any conclusions either.
“People love them, from twelve-year-olds on up to grandmothers,” says Anne Smart, head librarian at the South End branch of the Boston Public Library. Yet as the genre gains readers, it is also encountering those who question the books’ literary worth. The writer Terry McMillan, author of *Waiting to Exhale*, set off a recent round of criticism when an e-mail in which she deemed the books “exploitative,” “racist” and “poorly written” circulated widely last fall. McMillan said that those who oppose the new genre will “make our opinions known, to aid in making clear to the public just how demeaning these books are and what it means to our community.”

Despite the controversy, the Boston Public Library holds a sizable collection of street-lit novels. “We’re customer driven,” says Smart. “Our goal is to please our customers, and this is what they want.”

While readership numbers are difficult to obtain, those familiar with street lit say its popularity is rising. Several mainstream publishers have taken notice. Simon & Schuster, St. Martin’s Press and Random House all recently started their own urban-literature divisions, offering six-figure book deals to promising authors.


With few authors producing new work, the genre waned in the late 1970s. A decade or so later, as gangsta rap began to address the realities of life...
in the ghetto, the books were embraced by the hip-hop generation as part of their cultural heritage. Many early rappers cited the work of Beck and Goines as their inspiration, and artists such as Ice-T, Tupac Shakur and Ludacris referenced the authors in their music.

The modern street-literature movement was born in 1999 with the publication of *The Coldest Winter Ever*, rapper Sister Souljah’s novel about the daughter of a Brooklyn drug dealer, and *True to the Game*, Teri Woods’s novel about a young girl from the projects who falls in love with a drug dealer. Researcher Morris says the books were a response to the social conditions of the preceding decade: “With the crackdowns from the government, many people went to jail. When they were released, people wanted to tell their stories, the reality of what was happening in the drug culture.”

One influential author, Vickie Stringer, wrote her first novel, *Let That Be the Reason*, while serving a five-year sentence for dealing cocaine, and started selling her books from the back of her car after her release. Since larger publishers initially had no interest in a genre aimed at a community they believed did not read widely, new authors developed their own infrastructure for selling their work. Readership grew through word of mouth. Initially sold mostly from folding tables set up on street corners, the novels soon found a place on the shelves of African American bookstores.

Stringer’s books were so popular that she founded Triple Crown Publications and began signing new authors. Titles from such independent publishers started showing up on *Essence* magazine’s best-seller list. Now all ten of the magazine’s paperback top best-sellers usually fall into the street-lit category, including the recent titles *Thug Matrimony, A Street Girl Named Desire* and *Weapons of Mass Seduction*.

As a bookseller and believer in the redemptive power of the written word, Lloyd E. Hart Jr. straddles the divide. Cofounder of the Black Library Booksellers in Boston, Hart is wary of the genre, though street-lit titles make up about 80 percent of his sales. “I sell them, but I’m aware of what’s between the pages,” he says. “They are entertainment, but few of them have literary merit.”

“All I could see was lurid book jackets displaying all forms of brown flesh, usually half-naked in some erotic pose, often accompanied by guns and other symbols of criminal life,” he wrote. “I felt as if I was walking into a pornography shop, except in this case the smut is being produced by and for my people, and it is called ‘literature.’”

Two high school students browse through books at the Black Library Booksellers.
From *Imagine This*  
by Vickie Stringer

I had a beautiful two year old son named Antonio and I was in the Franklin County Jail being held without bond for federal drug trafficking offenses.

I had been left for dead, abandoned by my so-called peeps. Sad and embarrassed to admit it, even my baby’s daddy, Chino, was still getting his hustle on—slangin’ them even after the feds laid me down like fresh tar on pavement. I was looking at football numbers—you know, four score and seven years trying to be true to the code. The street code of *don’t tell*, Chino instilled that in me: Ball ’til you fall. And my mouth was shut. But something was going on inside my head. A fight was raging between me, Pammy, and my alter ego, Carmen.

Pammy wanted to be with her son and out of this game. Pammy wanted to be free.

Carmen wanted to be in prison. Carmen wanted to be locked. She didn’t mind an all-expenses-paid vacation to rest a spell and recoup. She really had no issue that the feds *laid a bitch down for a minute*.

Carmen was a baller—a hustler—a dealer—a playa. A *goin’-for-mine-by-any-means-necessary*-type bitch.

To talk, or not to talk, Shakespeare ain’t had shit on me. This was my dilemma, for real. I could talk and walk, or shut up and try ’til I die. On the other hand, talking could mean, well, death. Shit. I was fucked either way and there was no turning back.

From *The Coldest Winter Ever*  
by Sister Souljah

I felt so played I didn’t even want to turn around toward my girls. I’d have to tell my whole crew that I got dissed like I was a piece of shit. I just tightened up, put on my Brooklyn ‘tude, grabbed the next nigga standing close to me, and started to dance. I was gonna move with fury, let Midnight know what he was missing. I handed my Coach bag to my girl and started shaking my ass all the way to Alabama, using this dumb fuck dancing in front of me like a prop as I tried to catch Midnight’s attention again. My body was shaking and sweating as anger and desire fought it out. Yes desire, ’cause I was definitely turned on. The lighting situation made it hard for me to catch Midnight’s eyes. At the point that my body wanted to collapse from exhaustion I saw Midnight looking in my direction and heading my way. Smiling to myself, I thought, *I know I’m a bad bitch.*

I knew he would come back.

Excerpts reprinted with permission from Simon & Schuster, Inc.
Hart continues to sell the books because they encourage African Americans to read, especially males. “I’d rather see them reading something than not reading anything,” Hart says. His goal is for his customers to move on to more substantial books, in the hope that reading will help them make better decisions in their lives. “I’ve seen people say ‘This is running thin—what do you have with more [to it]?’” he says. “I tell them about Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou—books with more value and history to them.”

Hart says that street literature is appealing to his customers because it reflects the reality many of them inhabit. “These are the stories that inner-city folks can relate to. This is what they see outside their window.”

Indeed, many readers say they are drawn to the books because their rough scenes and colloquial style make them more realistic. “I read [them] because I’ve witnessed some of these stories,” says Jauana Reddick, eighteen, of Boston. “These are true life stories.”

Chanelle Jameson, fifteen, of Boston, says she reads the work of black authors from a variety of genres, and enjoys street-lit novels because they are “entertaining.” “Some of the books have a good lesson, like not to be on drugs,” Jameson says, though she doesn’t think younger teens should read them: “In some books there are scenes where they’re having sex, and it’s just too much information.”

Much of the street-lit controversy derives from the fact that the books are especially popular with young audiences, who may not recognize the political and social implications. Morris, who worked as a Philadelphia librarian for seven years, says, “Teens I’d never seen before were coming to the library and requesting these books in droves. We couldn’t keep them on the shelves.” Partially as a result of that experience, Morris has focused her research on street lit’s teenage readership. She argues that for teens who have grown up surrounded by chaos, it helps to have characters and situations with which they can identify. “They’ve already been victims of sexual abuse, and they’ve already seen scenes of domestic violence. If you let them read text word for word and contem plate, it helps them make sense of their own reality.”

Morris now leads a book club in the Widener branch of the Philadelphia Public Library in which she reads and discusses street-lit books with teens. Rather than promoting gangs, prostitution and drug use, she says, the books give teens the tools they need to avoid this lifestyle by helping them understand the themes running through their own lives. The novels, she hopes, will help them understand the consequences of their actions. Recently a pregnant teenager in Morris’s group told her the books were actually keeping her off the streets. “She said, ‘If I’m reading about it, I don’t need to be doing it,’” says Morris.

For Morris, that’s justification in itself. “Some people don’t want to deal with the fact that there are poor people living in dangerous environments on a daily basis,” she says. “But these voices need to be heard.”

Lloyd E. Hart Jr. (right) helps a patron locate a title.
“What kills me about The Wizard of Oz is that Dorothy actually wants to go back to Kansas.”

Angela Dufresne, a painter with a heart rooted somewhere between Godard’s France and Pasolini’s Italy, told me this in her studio, making it clear that she and Dorothy share little besides a birthplace. “I wasn’t into eyeliner or cheerleading. We’re talking Bob Dole’s ’80s here,” said Dufresne of her Midwestern upbringing.

But she did enjoy film, channeling Elizabeth Taylor’s ’50s and ’60s as an antidote to the Republican icon’s time and place. She absorbed Taylor the way most kids do cartoons, with her mother aiding and abetting. “We’d literally sit and watch all of [Taylor’s] movies together. I’m sure that’s why I’ve painted her a lot.”

Dufresne lets her obsession with Hollywood’s Golden Age fuel paintings that have delighted critics with their wildly irreverent devices. She renders classic scenes from classic films—with a little editing. Her work, which often places her close friends in iconic scenes from cinema history, has shown at premier venues for rising artists, including London’s Saatchi Gallery, Los Angeles’s Hammer Museum and Boston’s Miller Block Gallery.

That’s the fun part. The work happens in Dufresne’s Brooklyn studio. One look at the canvases featuring altered stills from flicks foreign and domestic, and you could easily mistake her studio for a Hollywood soundstage just a few years south of the Warsaw Pact.

And yes, Elizabeth Taylor makes her presence felt. Ditto for Godard’s muse Anna Karina. In one piece, a young woman sits glumly in her drawing room. For cineastes, the image may recall a scene from Le Petit Soldat, but the face is unfamil...
Back in Dufresne’s studio, the coloring commanded attention on one large canvas in particular. Green house, from top to bottom. Green road. Green overhead. Green trees, naturally. But white kept springing to mind. Tough to say why, though, until Dufresne put things in perspective.

“This is my White House painting,” she said with a laugh. “You know, putting it in a completely different place, sustainable living.”

And it’s true: White House 2069 depicts a hulking edifice that resembles 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue—staid, set apart, unmistakably housing kings and kingmakers in a land of plenty. But the structure has a benevolent essence as well, evoking a tropical clime where every little thing is indeed gonna be all right. Not exactly the vibe you get during a walk through Washington, with its scurrying lobbyists and staggering homicide statistics.

Of course, in this painting and most others, Dufresne doesn’t care about exact renderings. She’s interested in what if. What if the White House uprooted itself to a kinder, gentler locale where leaders couldn’t help but use might for right? Could happen, at least in the painting.

Not every piece has such an affirming, playful conceit. One look at Derek Jackson, her interpretation of the officer in Takeshi Kitano’s Violent Cop, set with despairing eyes but the slightest of grins, and it’s clear that hell hath no fury like a man torn between his interior life and his nine-to-five routine.

Jackson, a painter and photographer based in Portland, Maine, who sat for the piece named for him, shared his experience. “It was such a huge honor,” he said. “I knew that whatever she did would capture, illustrate, nail—that’s it, nail me to the wall. Not just, ‘Oh yeah, that kinda looks like my nose,’ but those imperceptible idiosyncrasies that you don’t even notice you notice. I think for Angela it’s really everything, she’s looking all over you at once and feeling you at the same time.”

The periscope effect created a certain tension. Jackson wasn’t always sure where she was headed. “Half the time I can hardly understand what Angela’s talking about, much less keep up with her crazy music and film references. And she changes her mind a lot. She mentioned the film, and then she said ‘fuck the film’ and that she didn’t want to depict me as being tragic…Angela’s in the business of music and laughter.”

Still though, it’s business. “[The session] was very serious,” said Jackson. “Not in a freaky way. Angela has this lazy eye, right? But—in all the years I’ve known her, I’ve never seen this—it goes straight when she’s painting. Well, it kind of goes all over the place. When her eyes are scanning for info they’re straight, but then they go all crazy. Because eyes don’t matter when she’s throwing the paint around. It’s like the visual information gets assimilated, then transmutes into physical action. Not just copying, either, but a synthetic response. Sounds cheesy, but she turns light into music.”

In Dufresne’s studio, there’s an odd melody to one piece that features a prostitute. She draws on Herzog’s influence here, and the pristine landscape belies the salacious commerce under way in the noonday sun. A bawd propositions a man with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. “I was interested in just the signs, what I could convey with her body language, her outlines,” Dufresne said. “I mean, look at that. Would you think she was anything but a prostitute?”

No, but in the next breath I mentioned the woman’s shoes—which I thought clashed, one dark purple and one fluorescent—and for a moment things got tense.

“That’s so funny you’d say that,” she said. “Because the shoe’s not there…You’re letting your own perception inform everything.”

Films always look different on a second viewing. Maybe the painting would too at some point.

At the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, writers and visual artists take refuge for nine-month fellowships. At parties, they generally stick with their tribe—painters swilling imports and telling potty jokes at one end of the room, writers splitting hairs on the opposite side.

Yet from the moment Dufresne arrived at the work center as a visual-arts fellow in October 2002, she reached across the aisle with Clintonian finesse. Several writers told me that Dufresne had a knack for saying just the right thing to knock them out of their writer’s rut—she befriended fiction writers especially, perhaps on account of their shared admiration for narrative
structure, not to mention pasta and good wine.

“Angela was constantly cooking,” said Salvatore Scibona, a fiction writer whose debut novel, The End, is scheduled for release from Graywolf Press this spring. “A lot of us entertained, but she had people over all the time… It wasn’t this calculated thing, she just thrived off the group dynamic. That’s just how she is, all accelerator and no brake.”

Anne Sanow, another fiction fellow, said Dufresne had no trouble balancing her work schedule with the demands of trotting out new recipes for assembled guests each night. “We had a lot of dinner parties that winter, often featuring Angela slinging meat around and inventing these amazing last-minute salsas to go with everything,” said Sanow. “I was more than a little impressed. Here was a woman who could paint all day, whip up some of the best food you’d ever eat, finish several sketches while showing us a movie, and then play guitar while the neighbors contemplated calling the cops at 2 a.m.”

All accelerator and no brake, but not quite a boxcar derby. Dufresne slows down occasionally, and her thoughtful commentary stays with people when she does.

“The thing is, these get-togethers were a lot more than that,” said Sanow. “A casual exchange of music or movies or food was also an exchange of ideas, things that you absorb and that somehow pop up later when you’re working.”

Or when you think you’re done. Scibona recalled a remark Dufresne made after one of his readings that altered the course of his upcoming novel. “I gave a reading of an excerpt,” he said. “And she said something I’ll never forget. She came up to me afterward and said, ‘Salvatore, it’s amazing how you always have to do things the difficult way.’ That changed my approach…and it’s always stayed with me.”

That’s what happens with compelling characters at the top of their game. They stay in your head, both for what they say and what they do.

“She’s a cowboy,” said Jackson. “On some frontier shit. The way [Angela] lives her entire life is so brave and smart and unapologetic. I think she maybe comes off as a badass, even to herself sometimes. But she kind of is…”

Trust her friends when they tell you she could talk about this stuff all night. She’s done it before.

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Blandine Jeanson as Emily Bronte from “Weekend”
I am a hipster. After an internal crisis fraught with existential angst at every turn, I can finally admit it: I am a twenty-two-year-old, 250-pound man who daily and for no good reason squeezes into size-two jeans. The denim, like sausage casings, imprisons my husky legs and along with them, my secret.

I used to be normal, the mildest of mannered. A warm evening in April changed it all. A sojourn to the city of Philadelphia to see a friend’s new apartment became a gateway, my ah-ha moment. This is my story.

“What is a vegan potluck dinner?” I asked with childlike shyness, averting my gaze to the station-wagon-wood-paneled walls. My high school chum, as a housewarming event, had invited the neighborhood over for dinner. Those assembled scoffed at me, probably just as they’d scoffed at my friend when he asked the same question.

“We’re vegans. We eat nothing that comes from animals. We exploit no living creature.”

“What about honey?” I asked. They thought I was being coy. “No, sweet child, no honey. True vegans don’t even walk on pavement.”

“There are animals in pavement?”

“So many animals, child. So, so many animals.”

Why in my memory these gateway hipsters talked as though they were in a Toni Morrison novel, I’ll never know.

It went on. “Why are your pants so tight?” I asked. “And your sweater vests?”

They laughed and laughed. I was a comedian to them, hilarious and wry. I delighted in the attention they deigned to give me. I’ll never forget the last words of the evening. They ring in my ears even now as I write: Does anyone have any coke? For reasons that I still can’t explain, I went home and created a MySpace page. I can see, reader, your scowl. Another MySpace joke, how topical.

But this, good reader, was the year 2004. MySpace existed exclusively to connect “scene kid” to “scene kid”—to, sometimes, pornography—all around the world. It tapped into the psychological impulse shared by

Dress black to protest the war. Dress like a zombie to protest biohazardous dumping. Dress like a whale to save the whales. And the war. And the war. And the trees. And the war. Always sucking away on cigarettes. We had to switch to American Spirits on the day we protested Camel. We also had to wear camel costumes.
all hipsters to be more esoteric than their neighbors. I was in a secret society, among brethren.

Or almost. A big step in becoming a hipster was deciding what kind of hipster I wanted to be. There are several, among them the above-described vegan hipster, the protester, the urban bohemian, the gutter punk. I started with the last, also known as the greaser. Getting into it was easy: I resurrected all of my elementary-school shirts from a box in my parents’ basement. I told them I was making a quilt. They asked if I was gay.

Next, I stopped washing. But it turns out the time gutter punks save in not bathing they spend on doing their hair. I shaved myself a bi-hawk—two Mohawks, one on either side of my head, dyed fire-engine red. Unfortunately, I was blessed with the hair of my people—curls, loose but springy, that grow up and out. Haircut complete, I bore a striking resemblance to a famous television clown. No, no, that would not do. I was still some distance from home.

I bounced back, quickly landing with a group of protest hipsters. I was shorn, fresh from the hair salon, when they accosted me on the street and asked if I hated when things die. I’d have to stop showering again.

Being a protester was like going to summer camp. We’d see the same people at the protests in different costumes. Each day there was a new color to wear or a new way to paint my face. Dress black to protest the war. Dress like a zombie to protest biohazardous dumping. Dress like a whale to save the whales. And the war. And the trees. And the war. Always sucking away on cigarettes. We had to switch to American Spirits on the day we protested Camel. We also had to wear camel costumes.

As we stood outside the butcher’s shop dressed like cows, I told my new friends I’d stopped eating meat. I was still sneaking it on the side. I pulled my snout down to make sure the butcher didn’t recognize me.

Next was the silent protest. We marched on Government Center in Boston, dressed in black and completely silent. No signs. I don’t know what we were protesting.

After my trial period was over and I was deemed a full-fledged protest hipster, it was decided that I needed a tattoo: Da Sunshine Posse on my right foot. Being terrified of needles, I sat in the tattoo parlor trying not to sweat on the chair. The walls were bubble-gum pink, and the scene was less than comforting, more like a trip to Tina Turner’s Acid Queen Circus than anything resembling a medical establishment. As the tattoo artist, Ken, approached me with the needle, I threw up and almost passed out.

Breathing heavily, I tried to remain conscious. I heard Ken’s voice.

“Is that a piece of hamburger?”

I’ve finally found a home as an urban bohemian: my jeans, tight; my shoes, Chuck Taylors. I know that Chucks are owned by Nike, which makes shoes in sweatshops in Indonesia. That might have mattered before, but it no longer does. Caring about anything in Urban Bohemia is strictly forbidden. I only listen to bands with the word “wolf” in the title. Sometimes I’ll listen to more mainstream bands like The Teeth, or Sure Juror. I have a mustache post-ironically. (Post-irony, in the case of mustache growing, means one grows a mustache as a lark, only to realize that one actually likes it and benefits from having it—but one never admits wanting said mustache.) In fact, many things I do, I do post-ironically. Go to work, brush my teeth, vote.

Now that I know who I am, I have decided to come out to my parents. The truth is gnawing at me. Every time I see my mom and dad, they insist that I buy a pair of khakis that fit, finally take the GRE, or wash my hair. I’ve tried e-mailing them a link to my blog, but they didn’t read it. It’s clear the moment will have to be in person. I imagine the scene:

“Mom, Dad, I’m a hipster.” I say it at the dinner table. It’ll be difficult to adopt a mock-sincere tone, when I actually do care.

My mom will cry. My dad will threaten to disown me. But after I explain to them that I am not in a cult, I still like girls and I do not have to renounce Judaism, they’ll probably seem just as apathetic as I pretend to be.

“Oh. That’s nice,” my father will say, using a piece of white bread to sop up the chicken grease on his plate. “I like your mustache.”

Big Techno Werewolves
Weedwolf
Seasons of the Wolf
Wolf Parade
Wolf and Cub
Fox and Wolf
Peter and the Wolf
Wolfman
AIDS Wolf
Wolf Eyes
Wolfmother
Economy Wolf
Superwolf
Mozart
Peanut Butter Wolf
We Are Wolves
Wolf
Mark Ciommo had just finished his victory speech at the Corrib Pub in the Brighton neighborhood of Boston. Smiling nonstop, he sidestepped and bobbed his way through the establishment’s capacity crowd. The corners of his mouth took a break only when he drank from his Bud Light or yelled out the name of a friend in his distinctive Boston accent, even though he already stood close enough to embrace and shake hands with V-E Day enthusiasm.

Ciommo’s Election Day 2007 prize was the Boston City Council’s District 9 seat. He’d defeated his closest opponent, Greg Glennon, by 20 percent. To help celebrate the victory of the only newly elected district councilor in Boston, Ciommo’s extended family squeezed into the Irish pub along with campaign workers and political allies.

Also at the party were Naakh Vysoky and Sergey “Serge” Bologov, with whom Ciommo seemed to be sharing the spotlight. Despite having denied that they would endorse a candidate in the District 9 race, the two power brokers, famous for their influence in garnering votes from Boston’s Russian Jewish immigrant community, were part of the celebration. Bologov chatted with members of the Boston pipefitters union and hugged Ciommo and state senator Stephen Tolman. Vysoky sat in a corner of the room as small crowds ebbed and flowed in front of his table.

Coveted endorsements by Vysoky and Bologov in local campaigns have brought hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of voters to the polls over the years. These reliable “blocs” have attracted both flattering and scornful attention from a spectrum of political candidates, and the mythology surrounding Vysoky and Bologov grows with each passing election. Their leadership has also brought influence and notice to an underrepresented community.

Many observers see Bologov and Vysoky as functioning as so-called “ward bosses,” in the mold of James Michael Curley and Martin “Mayor Maker” Lomasney, two early-twentieth-century Boston Irish leaders. Together Bologov and Vysoky have promoted the Russian voter bloc in Massachusetts to a prominence that rivals larger constituencies across the state. Their practices draw comparisons to those of Irish-American leaders such as the late Jim Kelly, who stayed in office as the city councilor of South Boston, or “Southie,” until his death twenty years after he first took office. Yet many politicians, as well as Vysoky and Bologov themselves, disavow the leaders’ clout along with the notion that votes in twenty-first-century Boston can still be obtained wholesale.

“I’m writing a story about voting blocs,” I shouted that night to Frank Perullo, a Web entrepreneur and president of the campaign-consulting firm Sage Systems who had worked for Ciommo. In one hand Perullo clutched a cocktail in a plastic cup, and in the other he wielded an iPhone to access election results.

“You should write about Wallingford Road, my friend,” he said, with a full belly laugh.

“I was at Wallingford Road this morning,” I said.

“Crazy,” he continued.

“Also, I noticed that two of the Russian power brokers are—”

Perullo finished my sentence: “They’re here! Naakh Vysoky and Serge Bologov! Absolutely,” he shouted. By this point his grin was torquing his face. “Unbelievable! I mean seriously, I want someone to write a book about this stuff.”

Perhaps—but Perullo didn’t want a major role in the paperback edition. Right after issuing his “write-a-book” exhortation, he would only agree to speak “completely” off the record.

Brighton’s Wallingford Road doubles as the polling place for District 9’s Ward 21, Precinct 13, and the location of Jewish Community Housing for the Elderly (JCHE). Mostly Russian immigrants live in the JCHE, the largest elderly housing development in Massachusetts. They vote with startling uniformity, according to longtime observers. Indeed, the so-called “Wallingford Road vote,” which the eighty-seven-year-old Vysoky allegedly controls, remains a staple of local politics and the catalyst for gossip among insiders at City Hall and on Beacon Hill. It has also been the focus of consider-
able controversy in recent years over alleged irregularities at the polls.

Understanding the roles Vysoky and Bologov play in District 9 politics is by no means simple. Certain facts are known: Bologov serves as president of the Coalition of New American Voters and the League of Russian Voters, two statewide organizations that offer citizenship assistance to Russian immigrants and refugees. His position gives him the opportunity to advise residents of the Russian-speaking community on their voting options.

Bologov is also the executive director of the Russian Community Association of Massachusetts. When I called there and asked for him, a deep voice with a noticeable accent told me that “[Bologov] has very flexible schedule.” Then he said: “To catch him here in this office, it’s”—he paused, with a pronounced smack of his lips—“impossible.”

“Serge is a very powerful man,” said Shuya Ohno, communications director of the nonprofit Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition, where Bologov sits on the board. I’d only seen Bologov in photos, posing with local Russian and Jewish leaders, and in one case handing Boston Mayor Thomas Menino a community award. In his late thirties, he has the build of a Soviet premier: a stockiness that counterbalances a rotund head with cheeks that protrude beyond the limits of his cranium when he smiles—not exactly intimidating, but not benign, either.

“He has a lot of clout, delivers a lot of votes, but I don’t know that anyone fears him,” said Ohno. “Serge Bologov is a well-respected leader…He is not only well informed but understands the responsibilities he has to the community he represents.”

A month before the election, I managed to catch Bologov on his cell phone. As he drove to a meeting with fellow community organizers, I asked about Vysoky’s endorsement for the District 9 race. Bologov replied that he and Vysoky were supporting no one in the election. “But there was a lot of chaos,” he said with a chuckle. “I do not want to do this type of experiment in the future. Other people stay out of elections, so why would we be any different?”

Staying out of the race “created more problems than we expected,” he continued. “[The candidates] had to fight for the same votes in the same community, [and] it got a little bit out of hand.”

I later called Vysoky—a former physician who has lived in the United States since emigrating from the Ukraine thirty years ago—to be told that he was withholding an
endorsement because he couldn’t decide between two close friends. In the second call I made, he hung up before I could say goodbye. “All of the time the politicians bother me!” he said at one point.

Kevin McCrea, who ran for city councilor at-large in 2005, said he couldn’t get a meeting with Vysoky. He wrote on his campaign blog: “This is what makes politics so fascinating. I’d love to know what goes on in [Vysoky’s] meetings, what is promised or what deals are made. I spoke to one of the participants of the meeting, and they couldn’t tell me how they were invited to the meeting. It was a mystery to that person, but they were happy with the 350 votes! We (and everyone else) had contacted Naakh, but he said he was old and didn’t get involved in politics anymore. I knew a blow off when I heard it!”

Another blogger, Michael Pahre, called attention to the “uglier” rumors about the Wallingford Road bloc on his blog, “Brighton Centered,” but would not comment on his remarks. These rumors likely include the alleged corruption at polling locations that prompted a 2005 Department of Justice investigation. No charges were filed, but the Justice Department called for observers at the polls and improved language services before concluding its investigation.

After my failed attempts at substantive conversations with Vysoky and Bologov, I tried to reach the campaigns themselves. Glennon never returned my calls, but Ciommo’s campaign manager, Mike McLaughlin, was willing to talk. His earnestness may have revealed his inexperience—he ended our conversation with an unnecessarily humble request that I address his campaign’s issues—but all the same, he sounded like a budding Ari Fleischer (or George Stephanopoulos, depending on your persuasion). I pleaded with him for at least one comment regarding the Wallingford Road endorsement.

“There are buildings with predominantly Russian populations, and since they have a high voter turnout, we do pay attention to them,” said McLaughlin. “But we don’t look at it as a demographic; we try to talk to voters individually.”

When I asked whether Ciommo had spoken to Bologov or Vysoky on an individual basis, McLaughlin held fast. “Again, it goes back to just talking to voters,” he said, refusing to address the Wallingford Road endorsement.

And yet Vysoky, Bologov and Ciommo celebrated together on election night. At the Corrib party, I spoke with McLaughlin again. He toed the party line. “We tried to talk to as many voters as possible,” he said, assiduously steering me away from the suggestion of Vysoky or Bologov influence.

Towards the end of that evening, I approached Vysoky. To my astonishment, he invited me to his home. That was how, on a rainy winter afternoon, I found myself sitting at Vysoky’s dining table in his one-bedroom apartment at
the JCHE, ogling his floor-to-ceiling wall of citations and pictures of himself with a wide array of local politicians. He had photos with bigwigs past and present, including Congressman Michael Capuano, former Governor Mitt Romney, Secretary of State William Galvin and the late District 9 City Councilor Brian Honan, who’d visited Vysoky in the hospital almost every day after the first of his two heart attacks.

“This is a good guy, this is a good guy,” Vysoky said in a raspy voice as his index finger darted over photographs of elected officials.

Sitting at the table rearranging additional photographs and certificates that hadn’t made it to his wall for lack of space, Vysoky told a story of Greg Glennon and former State Representative Brian Golden shoveling Wallingford Road’s sidewalks. While his wife of sixty years strolled in and out of the kitchen preparing dinner, Vysoky joked that people liked to talk about the time he prevented the MBTA from removing a train stop near the JCHE, although he preferred to philosophize about politics and world affairs. As he opined on topics ranging from terrorism to trust to his own personal history, Vysoky drew me in—despite my best intentions to remain impartial. I couldn’t imagine this slight man being wounded twice while fighting with the Soviet Red Army’s infantry in World War II.

That afternoon Vysoky made more eye contact with his bright blue eyes than most people do in a week. It was clear I was in the presence of a man of immense personal charm, someone capable of imparting a lifetime’s worth of advice in the span of an afternoon and—perhaps more tellingly—someone whose effect was such that listeners might take the advice to heart. Though he downplayed his ability to speak English, Vysoky’s thoughts and political affiliations came through with complete clarity. “Ciommo is a perfect guy,” he said at least twice. “I love him and he loves me. I am not a politician. I am in between the politicians, but they say I am a politician.”

As it would seem he is. On election day, a trio of Russian women gathered under the JCHE’s awning to wait for a bus to take them to an off-site activity. They each knew Vysoky’s name and acknowledged his leadership.

“Naakh is the boss,” said a woman who wished to remain anonymous, referring to the forty-person committee that Vysoky heads, the same committee with which Kevin McCrea had failed to obtain an audience.

“He knows a lot. One percent he is a politician, but 99 percent he is with the people,” said another woman.

“He helps them become citizens,” offered Sima Dimont, seventy-five, one of the few people willing to give her name or to say for whom she’d cast her vote—Ciommo—even though she told him he was too honest.

According to Bologov, during the conversation I had with him while he was driving to his meeting, Vysoky assisted many of the thousand residents of the JCHE in getting their citizenship and accompanied at least 160 of them to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service offices to help them through their tests. “He is their Mother Teresa,” Bologov said. “He is my role model, in a way. My mentor.”

Vysoky himself remains earnest, self-effacing and enigmatic. “I cannot work for everybody, but some people, they deserve it. I cannot stay away,” he said. “This is my sickness. It is a sickness. I cannot refuse.”
A Game T

Human

BY JENNA BECK

Photos by Stephanie Yeow

In the faculty lounge of a junior high school in Japan, Principal Iwasa Kocho points to a computer screen. “There,” he tells a teacher, who taps an optical mouse to place a digital black stone on the game board. Instantly, a white stone appears at another point; the computer has made its move. At the beginning of the game, Iwasa admired the computer for its speed. Now, he is altogether exasperated with his adversary. “This machine”—he emphasizes the noun—“does not know alive and dead!” The game is over in a few minutes, an easy win for Iwasa.

Computers are good at games. With their definite rules and discrete, win-or-lose outcomes, games are the stuff of binary dreams. But there’s an exception: the three-thousand-year-old Eastern game of Go. The object of Go, which is played on a nineteen-by-nineteen grid with black and white stones, is to keep more of your stones “alive” and to secure more territory on the board than your opponent. Although Go is a win/lose game that follows relatively straightforward rules, in thirty years of trying no one has been able to create a computer program that can beat even intermediate human players. The ancient game played by more than twenty-five million people seems to be too human for computers. The response: Make computers more human. Gaming programmers worldwide are struggling to do just that, and the task is not a simple one.

According to the American Go Association, the game is more than just a pastime. It provides “an analogy with life, an intense meditation, a mirror of one’s personality, an exercise in abstract reasoning, or, when played well, a beautiful art in which black and white dance...”
across the board in delicate balance.” The best Go players rely on such nebulous powers as judgment and intuition to evaluate the “life” and “death” of their stones during a game. An apparently dead group can come alive with the placement of a single stone, and a live group can be killed just as easily.

Go players rely so heavily on intuition and experience to evaluate their plays that the game seems, in those respects, to be unteachable. “You can’t write down a set of rules and directions that would make someone play a good game of Go,” says David Fotland, an advanced player who also created one of the best commercial computer programs for the game. “Good players are drawn to the right place on the board.” Therein lies the dilemma: If you can’t write the directions for humans, it makes it exceedingly difficult to write them for computers.

IBM’s Deep Blue computer, which defeated the world chess champion Garry Kasparov in 1997, utilized two classical programming functions, tree search and evaluation. These are the keys to a chess program’s success: They show the computer which moves are better than others. The programs play by searching hundreds of thousands of possible moves and evaluating each one to see which will lead to the highest score. If a programmer can write a good evaluation function for a game, the computer will best a human player by brute force simply because it can search through so many more possibilities.

Go is a far more difficult game to evaluate by classical methods than chess and because the life or death of the stones often remains unfixed until the end of the game. If a player thinks he will be able to kill an enemy group of stones later on, for instance, he will deem the group to be dead and use his current move to capture more territory or attack the enemy in a different place. Throughout most of a game, the life and death of the stones hangs in the realm of human judgment. The challenge for modern Go programmers is to create the evaluation function that replaces that judgment in their computers.

This means the programs need to be designed with the ability to “think” like humans do. Several years ago, programmer Markus Enzenberger at the University of Alberta began work on a program called NeuroGo, which won a medal in a computer Go tournament in 2003. As its name suggests, NeuroGo emulates the function of the neural networks found in human brains. A digital “neuron” has a weight of significance, similar to a biological neuron’s activation threshold. If the digital neuron receives enough positive input from a
move it searches and evaluates, the threshold is reached and the computer places a stone on the board. The “intelligence” lies in the refinement of the weights of significance: After each game concludes, it is scored and played again in reverse. The program compares the desired outcome to what actually happened and adjusts its weights of significance accordingly. By trial and error, it calibrates its own evaluation function to reward better moves. The system learns from experience.

Enzenberger trained NeuroGo like a professional athlete. He played it against itself, and watched it grow slowly stronger as its weights adjusted over thousands of games. Not only the strength of the program but the style of play changed during the course of the training sessions. It developed in the same way many human beginners learn to play Go: First the computer placed stones randomly on the board. Then it moved on to safe, defensive plays. Finally, it aggressively went after territory and enemy stones.

Yet despite its impressive achievements and hundreds of thousands of games, NeuroGo still hasn’t mastered some basic Go concepts, particularly those that would be considered intuitive in nature. Indeed, since its 2003 win, it hasn’t made much progress. Meanwhile, Enzenberger says he is getting tired of the interminable training sessions. He may soon abandon neural networks for another type of program, Monte Carlo, which gets its name from the gambling quarter in Monaco.

At first glance, the Monte Carlo model seems less human than other kinds of programs. While classical Go programs struggle with evaluation functions, and while neural networks learn evaluation for themselves, Monte Carlo systems step around the problem. Rather than trying to evaluate the importance of a move, a Monte Carlo program plays out random games that arise from each possible move. If more games for a given move are won than lost, the system deems the move a favorable one. In that sense, the probabilistic program “thinks” nothing like a human being.

But it is humanlike in some respects. In May 2006, at the Computer Olympiad in Turin, a Monte Carlo program called CrazyStone turned heads by taking the gold medal. French computer scientist Remi Coulom, CrazyStone’s programmer, says that “in a way, it does play a little more like a human than other programs” because of its probabilistic nature: It makes risky moves when it’s in trouble and safe moves when ahead. Other programs tend to play uniformly throughout a game. Now, because of programmers’ interest and increased computing power, Monte Carlo programs are widely regarded as the best in the world.

The real test of computer Go will be for a program to beat a professional human player. But pro Go players are scouted like prodigies in some Asian countries, raised on the game from as young as five years old. They might become first-level professionals by the age of twelve; a few achieve high-level status before death. “Before this year,” says NeuroGo’s Enzenberger, “if you asked me if a computer would beat a professional Go player, [I would have said no.] Now, I think we’ll see it happen in the next ten years.” Fotland, the...
Wadsworth started the recurring dance party Hearthrob with four other DJs and produces a project called SLUTTT, which might not make it into your mother’s CD collection but has gained traction locally and abroad. “[It’s] been catching on faster than anything I’ve ever done,” Wadsworth recently told The Phoenix. He began this particular project with a friend from New York. They mix electro-pop with vocals and post the tracks on MySpace. With these singles, Wadsworth pokes fun at self-obsessed teenagers, those “girls who take pictures of themselves in mirrors.” Boys take pictures of themselves, too, by all reports, but they somehow escape his scorn during the mixing sessions.

The Hearthrob quintet holds a dance session every Tuesday night at the Middlesex Lounge in Cambridge, pumping electro beats until closing. Weeknight warriors fill the place, no small feat in a town with manifold club options for students and reckless, downwardly mobile professionals.

Red Foxx remains upwardly mobile, his constant fatigue notwithstanding. When he takes off his sunglasses during our first meeting, deep-set bags are revealed beneath his eyes. “I had an hour of sleep last night,” he says. “The party I was playing at ended pretty late, and these people I had just met followed me home. They weren’t tired and I was, so I let them potter around in my hall while I slept. And before I knew it, it was morning and I had to get to work.” And, presumably, to leave a Post-it note for his new friends. Something like, Main exit’s that way. Please Google SLUTTT. Nice to meet you.

Wadsworth has that rare ability to balance his day job with a pulsing nightlife and ever-expanding Rolodex. He has a mantra—“Run, never stop”—and a seasonal relationship with sleep. “There’s always the winter for rest. Til then I’ll keep working and playing...
need to keep moving,” he insists, snapping his fingers to reinforce the point. “You need to keep the momentum rolling till it snowballs.”

His momentum has snowballed into an avalanche, but he got off to a slow start on the local DJ circuit. “In terms of playing out, I had tons of ’80s and ’90s records, so that’s what I’d spin at parties,” he says. “Nobody was listening to electro then, at least the stuff I liked. Electronic music was sputtering in 2003, was bubbling by 2005, and exploded the next year. And now finally I’m playing what I want!”

The music has ambiguous cross-influences—house, electro, club, hip-hop. Wadsworth has a penchant for pastiche, for melding styles into a vibe that draws listeners to the dance floor like bees to pollen. “I don’t know if there is necessarily a boom in DJ culture, just a shift of interest towards dance music, especially with the more creative and indie crowd,” he says of his mushrooming fan-base.

Previously Wadsworth worked as a video editor at the advertising agency Modernista! His clients included Hummer, Cadillac, Napster and U2. (He did post-production work on their “Window in the Skies” video.) He left the job because he found it stressful, but he looks back on the experience fondly with the benefit of hindsight. “Advertising is great, the people are great. It’s not for me, though…I love to create music. I love to make something out of nothing.”

While he’s into his mixes, Red Foxx never loses sight of his primary objective: To keep the crowd moving, and vertically at that. “All I really want is to make people throw their hands up in the air again,” he says. Patrons throw their hands way up at the Hearthrob events when he mans the DJ console. He arrives early at one particular party to sort out his playlist for the night and wolf down some food. “Where’s my sandwich? I’m starving,” he says to the bartender. Ditto for his fans, who desperately crave a weeknight shot in the arm.

They start pouring in just before midnight, and the Middlesex Lounge transforms into a haven for exhibitionists. Motley factions rush the dance floor, including one group of mustachioed men in leather skirts, their rainbow-colored Mohawks bobbing up and down to Red Foxx’s percussive mix. While they boogie and compete for the title of Most Mollified Cross-Dresser, DJ Red Foxx has tunnel vision, focused entirely on his MacBook screen and the next tune.

“Julian is a straight-up mutant. End of story,” says Hearthrob CEO Sensitive Hand, aka Greg Fournier. Mutant’s a strong word. From what I’ve gleaned he’s just a little bit…different. Guess
that explains the clientele. When Hearthrob regulars hit their fifties and sixties, you’ll expect them to show up at family weddings wearing T-shirts.

Wadsworth’s childhood friend Jordan Lex, who grew up with him in Virginia, says, “Julian and I used to baby-play when we were only two years old. I didn’t see him for a long time after our infant years. When I did see him again, it was in third grade, where he had just started at my school…His introduction to everyone in class was ‘Hi, I’m Jack the Ripper.’”

Wadsworth studied film and audio production at Emerson, moving with Ripper-like efficiency to graduate in just three years. “When I was a student, the party scene wasn’t so hot, at least with the kind of music I liked,” Wadsworth says. He played a show on WERS (88.9 FM), one of Emerson’s two radio stations. “I did the electronic music show ‘Revolutions,’ and back then it was a really flexible format. We’d play all the German and French electro music coming out at that time…Kiko, DJ Hell, The Hacker, Black Strobe…and we’d mix it with Miami Bass and classic house and techno and stuff like that.”

Multiple influences also permeate the SLUTTT project. “[It’s] really hard and dirty electro done by me and this girl in NYC. She just screams with this shitty attitude all over these tracks that I make with a half-broken analog synth,” Wadsworth says. “When I get into that dark mode making those tracks, that’s really a different side of me. I’ve been Red Foxx for a long time. I think I’m comfortable with him… when I’m making SLUTTT tracks, though, I really pour out all the horrible things I have pent up and make nasty songs out of them.”

One young woman sees through the nastiness and loves Wadsworth very, very much. Giovannah Chiu met him at Emerson, and they’ve dated for two years. “Julian is a man-child in the best way possible,” says Chiu. “He is eager, determined and steadfast about the things that only matter to him despite popular belief, which in the end become the things that matter to everyone…It is fun, exciting, and a discovery every day, being his girlfriend. I just need to make sure that I am there when frustrations arise, because that’s when his flirtation with knives surfaces.”

If Chiu ever had reason to doubt his affections, those qualms were probably laid to rest during the days leading up to a Hearthrob engagement last year, in mid-March. As it happened, Chiu’s birthday fell on the same evening, and the Hearthrob DJs released a YouTube promotional video in her honor. The clip runs for about thirty seconds and packs in several images—couples dancing under strobes, women frolicking in a waterfall, a man clutching a champagne bottle on the dance floor, and an upside-down burning cross (the implication being, one hopes, that Chiu is the image’s heavenly opposite). In addition to the show date and a message reading Giovannah’s Birthday over the guest of honor’s picture, we get one final plug before the clip fades out: No cover or we’ll kill ourselves.

Not exactly Bridges of Madison County, but heartwarming in its own special way. Besides, Wadsworth and Chiu thrive on edgy material. They work together on KarmaloopTV, an online program about streetwear and its surrounding culture. Wadsworth shoots and edits segments for the program whenever he takes a break from the music scene. Bloggers who review online television have responded with enthusiasm.

“KarmaloopTV launches today with a large catalog of good interviews and features with big names like Jonas of LRG, Bun B of UGK, Russell Simmons and many others,” writes the gang at NiceKicks.com, the online arbiter of hip, at least when it comes to shoes. “Hosted by Clinton Sparks, this network is a great on-demand alternative to what the FCC lets through. That’s right, uncensored.”

Wadsworth enjoys his work on the show but requests that I keep quiet about his strongest desire, at least around one person. “For me, working here is diversifying and improving my skills, and I’m also doing work on subjects more relevant to my interests. Really, though, I just want to tour and make music! But don’t tell my boss,” says the Foxx, with a nudge and a wink.

He’d like to do music full-time, preferring to play house rather than settle down in one: “I don’t particularly need a home. I’d be in good shape if I could travel and make music.”

Wadsworth has to take off shortly after this remark. He receives a call in mid-sentence and ends the interview, apologizing profusely. He packs his sandwich and says into his phone, “Chill, please chill! I’m coming over to see you now. It’s not what you think. Chill!”

Sometimes, even a sly Foxx double-books.
Yet my uncle David said nothing. Nothing about why he hadn’t told anyone he was going for an after-dinner walk the night he finally came to San Francisco. Nothing about how he got lost in my sprawling neighborhood of tract homes. Nothing about how he spent his first night in America asleep on our neighbor’s doorstep.

David’s arrival in July 2004 ended his twenty-one-year wait to immigrate to the United States from the Philippines. He was among some 4,600 Filipinos who had been sponsored by an American sibling years before, but who had to pass through the filter of complex laws that control the flow of foreigners into the country.

David’s eldest brother, my father, had arrived in the U.S. through my mother. As a nurse, she had come to America through a work program, and she sponsored my father after they wed in 1970. In 1982 my father petitioned for David, then a thirty-eight-year-old police officer, to come over, along with their sister Natividad, a social worker, and other brother Tony, an engineer. It was a time when the Philippines suffered from political corruption, economic turmoil and a growing insurgency against dictator Ferdinand Marcos. The instability drove thousands to seek a better life in the U.S.

Sibling-sponsored immigration, formally known as the Family Fourth Preference visa category, enables American citizens to sponsor their brothers and sisters for permanent residence in the United States. Family-sponsored visas, which include the fourth-preference category, account for approximately 37 percent of the 400,600 visas issued on average every year, according to the U.S. Department of State. Applications for such visas from the Philippines—between 12,000 and 22,000 annually, from the 1970s to today—contribute to a backlog in the immigration system that stretches across decades.

“Filipinos apply for family visas in disproportionate numbers as compared with people from other countries, in large part as a consequence of a century-long legacy of U.S. immigration, linked to U.S. colonialism, that has effectively produced what sociologists call ‘culture of migration,’ particularly to the U.S.,” said Robyn Rodriguez, a sociology professor at Rutgers University who specializes in Filipino migration.

Embassy officials each year grant visas to only a small percentage of all applicants. Who gets a visa depends on the demand in the home country and when an applicant files his petition. Applicants from countries with few petitions come first, while those from Mexico, India and other countries with more petitions squeeze in farther down the line. The Philippines, with its overwhelming number of visa requests, winds up at the end.

He slumped on the bed in a hospital gown, legs dangling from one side. Strands of graying hair spun in a frenzy atop his balding head. His patchy beard camouflaged the droop in his cheeks from years of dental neglect. Occasionally, he shook his legs like an impatient little boy.

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An applicant’s relationship to his U.S. sponsor also is an important factor. Children, spouses and parents are given priority over siblings. Immigrants sponsored by their brothers and sisters already in the U.S. typically wait at least ten years. Those from China and India are delayed twelve years, while applicants in Mexico wait thirteen years. Filipinos come in last in the long line for sibling-sponsored visas, often languishing for more than twenty years.

Waiting drains time. It upsets schedules, tests relationships and allows disease to fester. As the years tick on, people become anxious and lose patience. They grow tired. Productivity wanes, and memories fade. The longer people wait, the less confidence they have in what is to come.

“Undocumented migration and family wait times are not mutually exclusive issues. As a consequence of the wait, people are often forced to find other means of entry into the U.S. to reunite with their relatives,” Rodriguez said. “They may come as tourists and overstay their visa, rendering them undocumented.”

Rather than put their lives on hold, Tony, Natividad and David seized whatever jobs they could back home. Because engineering work is scarce in the Philippines, Tony traveled to the United Arab Emirates and drove fork-lifts in warehouses. As an assistant manager for the Pearl S. Buck Foundation in Quezon City, Natividad cared for children fathered and abandoned by U.S. servicemen. David rose through the ranks in the Philippine National Police and worked as an investigator. Because the telephone system was virtually nonexistent in the outlying province where his family lived, my father kept in touch with his siblings by writing letters.

Natividad, Tony and David’s turn for a visa did not come for more than two decades after my father submitted his petition. By then, the delay had eroded whatever vocational, educational or medical opportunities they would have had in the U.S. had they not waited so long. Strokes hit all three of them while they waited in the Philippines. Paralyzed on one side of her body, Natividad could no longer walk without assistance. Tony, though he could still quickly solve mathematical computations without a calculator, could not keep up physically with the fast-paced American lifestyle by the time he received his visa.

The effects on David were not as obvious, and he seemed to have the most potential. With his bachelor’s degree in criminology and experience as a policeman, he could have easily landed a job with a private security firm in the U.S. Under the American health-care system, he could have visited a doctor regularly and learned to take better care of himself. Most importantly, because immigrants may bring their dependents with them, he could have given his ten children their own chance at the American dream.

Instead, when he arrived, at age sixty, David brought only his two youngest daughters, Kathlyn and Abigail—among the last of his children who still qualified as dependents under immigration law. His health was also in decline. In addition to the stroke, David had emphysema brought on from smoking three packs a day for more than thirty years. He had lost many of his teeth.

None of his family members in the U.S. knew the severity of his illnesses until he was hospitalized after he wandered off on his first night here. Tests showed damage to his lungs from the emphysema and scars left from a bout of tuberculosis.

Within weeks of his release from the hospital, David disappeared twice more for days. The last time, the California Highway Patrol found him walking on the freeway miles away from my house. We soon learned he had Alzheimer’s disease.

By then David was a shadow of the policeman he’d been during the time he waited for his visa. After college, he served as an officer in the Philippine National Police in his hometown of Nabua, approximately five hundred miles outside Manila. He fought the Communist rebel forces of the New People’s Army in the provincial jungles.

According to his eldest sister, Trinidad, he smoked cigarettes to ward off the mosquitoes. “There’s lots of [them],” she said. “He would smoke so the mosquitoes would get out.”

While making his way through the ranks of the police force, David started a family. His wife taught school in a nearby town. During breaks from his own work, he would often go home to play with the children and cook chicken adobo, a dish infused with garlic,
During the wait to emigrate, David's family grew to a total of ten—not unusual for Filipinos living in rural areas. He named all of his sons David so that there would always be another David Saraspi, he once told me. Eventually David became police chief of two municipalities. At one point, he urged my father to speed up his petition because the rebels had put a hit out on him. My father considered applying for political asylum because the situation was so delicate. “Asylum is usually given if the government is after [someone],” explained my father, who had been a lawyer in the Philippines. "Considering the situation, I'd rather have me sponsor him. Plus, that was the sure way of getting the family to come with him.”

My father urged David to be patient. It was difficult. “Your uncle was already discouraged,” my father said. “He thought that it would not come through anymore, because it had been a long time. We did not expect that it would take that long.”

As David approached the mandatory retirement age of fifty-five, many of his children turned twenty-one or had families of their own, which made them ineligible as dependents for his pending visa. David then was spending much of his free time gambling, smoking and going to bars, in spite of his family’s protests. One of his older daughters, Monserrat, said he spent money earmarked for his dentures on rounds of drinks for his buddies. The stroke hit him shortly after he retired. After that he grew withdrawn.

By the time he got to the United States, David had been retired from the police force for five years. Hopeful that soy sauce and vinegar, said Trinidad. His disappearance on that first night was an isolated incident, I enrolled him and Kathlyn, eighteen, in English-as-a-second-language classes, taught them how to ride the bus and helped them look for work. Abegail, sixteen, went to high school.

Once we showed David what the American way of life was all about, we thought he would evolve as the caretaker for his daughters. But he was disheartened that everything took so much effort. It soon became clear that he could not take on the role. He often did not show up to his classes, which meant Kathlyn, Abegail and I had to search for him. He watched TV instead of socializing with my parents and their friends. Even after the doctors told us he had emphysema, he bummed cigarettes from strangers.

My father, who had high hopes for his youngest brother, was disappointed. He scolded David for wandering off without telling anyone where he was going. He also hid David’s cigarettes and stopped giving him money. When David did not change his behavior, my father eventually left him alone. We groomed Kathlyn to be the caretaker instead. She got a job at a local coffeehouse and used her salary to pay for Abegail’s school supplies and David’s medicine. She also saved money for plane tickets for her mother and two younger brothers. They had stayed behind in the Philippines so my aunt could finish the school year. They planned to immigrate to the U.S. the following year.

“I needed to take good care of Abegail and my dad. I was thinking it was payback time…He took good care of me when I was young,” recalled Kathlyn, who now lives with Abegail in their own apartment. “It was pretty hard, especially because he was really hard-headed and he didn’t listen.”

Following the Alzheimer’s diagnosis, his daughters, my father and I knew David could no longer be left unsupervised in our home, much less be expected to secure a job. In August 2005, we sent him back to the Philippines. He was sad, but relieved. He had been in the United States for thirteen months.

By December 2006, David had been home for more than a year and seemed content. At the traditional Noche Buena festivities following Christmas midnight mass, he lit up a cigarette. Seeing this, Monserrat repeated the warning David had heard so many times before from his children, siblings, nieces and nephews: “You keep smoking, you gonna die.” He went to bed and never woke up.

News of the retired chief’s death quickly spread across the region. Police colleagues poured into David’s house to pay their respects. At the funeral, relatives, friends and former coworkers filed past the sky-blue coffin decorated with ribbons inscribed with the names of his children and grandchildren. One of his nephews tucked cigarette packs into David’s pocket and the casket’s satin lining.

A marching band led the funeral procession from the brick church to the mausoleum as policemen escorted the hearse on foot. During the burial, twenty shots rang out a final salute to the man my uncle once had been.
The room—painted a noxious lilac, with all the charm of a Macy’s one-day sale—is poison for my confidence. Scores of people pretending they’re more famous than they are puff out their chests and show their feathers. Some bare their teeth.

I finger an e-mail, printed out and sleeping in my pocket. Proof that I deserve to be here: The selection committee is happy to announce that your film Woman on the Moon has been selected to be part of our international experimental film competition in the Lausanne Underground Film and Music Festival. Lausanne, Switzerland.

Now I’m in a lilac pen reserved for moderately famous people. I stretch my neck high to breathe through a cloud of cigarette smoke. Faces meld like an oil painting in a fire. I cling to the familiar ones, my friends Nick and Laura, the keepers of my sanity. They, in turn, look to me for direction. Like I know. The festival hasn’t even begun, yet already I long for the twelve-hour flight home. Flat recycled airplane air, sharp with the smell of steerage-class body odor and secret farts. Who needs the Alps? Who needs air fresher than any you’ve ever smelled in America? Not me. I want to go home.

I’m here because of a movie I made when I was twenty-one. I just turned twenty-two. The film was a class project. I don’t even like it that much. There are extra shadows everywhere. It jumps and stutters and scream of my inexperience. But it’s sweet, as Laura says. And important people like it: Professors. Employers. The country of Switzerland, apparently.

Lausanne is a city of outsiders. They tout it. They have a museum devoted entirely to the art of the mentally ill. I’m beginning to fear that I’m right at home. Soon, but not tonight, I’ll need to locate my theater and try not to throw up in it. I don’t know what I’m going to say to these people. R. Mond has taken a picture of himself in a photo booth once a month for twenty-seven years. Oh, this film took you three decades to make? Well, I’m hoping to graduate in the spring. I’m screwed.

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Laura, Nick and I lift our ears to the air and listen for Americans. Alerted, we descend like a swarm on Joe Nanashe, who is motioning confusedly at his glass and insisting to the waitress that he doesn’t know French. Joe sits in the corner, sunglasses on. He nurses a nearly empty beer and neon-orange soup left over from the dinner service. A filmmaker from Brooklyn, Joe has brought an “animated” film to the festival—six minutes of a directory of porn categories, typed into a Speak & Spell. He’s a genius.

And there, in the middle of it all, is the filmmaker Sean Meredith. Quiet and still, he is the eye of the storm. He makes no attempt to talk to anyone. His adaptation of Dante’s Inferno made with cardboard cutouts is entered in the features competition. Sean’s eyes are dark and small, like one of his puppet’s. He’s who everyone wants to be. They just don’t know it yet.

A collective gasp sweeps across the pen as the filmmakers from The Three Trials enter the room like The Mod Squad. Randy Greif, the director, stands 5’4” and stocky. Tanned, with tight curls, Randy took time off from producing easy-listening electronica to direct his first film, thinly veiled soft-core porn, competing with Sean’s work in the features category. Randy’s girlfriend Sonara poses with her photography book under her arm. The height of narcissism, Sonara not only took all the pictures in the book but also serves as the model for each one. She makes herself up as characters of different ages, sexes and ethnicities and poses for her own artful shots. Sometimes even in blackface. Which is not okay.

Randy’s cinematographer, Brad Cooper, breaks the silence first, after a man introducing himself as Giuseppe compliments his tie. Brad speaks slowly and deliberately. “It is because I am a homosexual.”

A whisper passes through the crowd: A girl is taking off her clothes. The word spreads like Ebola, and suddenly we’re all swept in pushes and shoves into the main theater. The now-naked brunette commands the space around her. I’m trying to prove to Laura that I’m not looking by chatting up a man who bears a striking resemblance to Gandalf the Grey. You’re from New Zealand? I never would have guessed.
The grand wizard’s mortal name is David Blyth. He crossed the ocean to show a documentary about straight men who like to wear latex masks and chat on webcams with other latex-clad men. Oh, and he directed the first five episodes of The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. I guess life imitates art. In his last episode, Blyth introduced the Green Ranger. It’s at this point that, squealing, I show everyone how old I am.

At eleven o’clock we move into the concert hall. Rock poet Lydia Lunch sways back and forth on stage. Her tree-trunk legs creak, and she wails, lamenting the fact that she did not get to shoot Andy Warhol. People are enthralled. In the middle of the floor there’s a girl in a cage about the size of a desk. As I stomp down to examine her, an angry mime pulls me aside. “There will be thirty-seven performance artists here throughout the festival,” he says. “I’d appreciate it if you did not disturb them.”

Mimes are not supposed to talk.

“I really want you to make something relevant,” Laura blurts out later as we walk back to the hotel. The streets of Lausanne are deserted on a Wednesday night. The buildings capture the sounds of our footsteps and throw them back at us, intensified. Our eyes ache from eight hours of independent film. “Your film is great. I love it, but it’s a slice of time and it’s passed,” Laura says.

I don’t understand, yet.

Friday night my film shows on a screen the size of my living room. All the cool kids show up: Joe, David Blyth, the girl from the cage, even Sean Meredith, whose film’s success has made him a reluctant idol walking among us. The lights dim, and I can’t help but laugh.

“It’s good, but it won’t get into Redstone,” the ex-girlfriend told me. We sat in the editing room together on one of my many days there. She was full of spite and insisted her name not be in the credits, even though she helped me edit for a day. I suppose she didn’t want to back a loser. Thanks, Katie. Because I’d never seen any other film festival, the Sumner Redstone festival stood as a mark of student-film greatness. Usually reserved for grad students, it honors recent work by BU filmakers, and the soiree always garners lines around the block. I wanted it. So I skipped every class I had and spent all of my time editing.

A six-minute film shouldn’t take eight days to edit, but this one was different. There is a man. There is a woman. They are not together. I sliced every frame on the computer and then deleted every other one eight thousand times, so that these flickering bodies danced together in a sad ballet. At least that’s what I told the school newspaper. I thought in single frames and feared for any epileptics who might watch this experiment.

Six months later, Katie wanted to be on the guest list for the Redstone. I was the youngest person to gain entry in a decade. I had become a celebrity in the film basement. My status: boy wonder.

For a brief time, I’m the boy wonder all over again in Lausanne. The group clomps through the cattle maze back to the famous people’s pen. They paw at me, ask me questions. Nick and Laura wander.
Audrey Fergason believes that if Jesus came back, he would not belong to just one church. With her brown hair held by a ponytail and small glasses perched on her nose, Fergason exudes earnestness and also passion. She gestures like a conductor at the crescendo when she talks about her favorite topic—religion. Her favorite class at Harvard Divinity School is called God Politics, or maybe it’s her 10 a.m. class on religion and the Holocaust, or perhaps she likes her theological discussion groups best. She can’t choose just one.

Fergason’s fervent religious views on politics and community service place her in famous company. When Ralph Waldo Emerson returned to the Harvard Divinity School to address the graduating class of his alma mater on July 15, 1838, he gave a speech that led to his being banned from speaking at Harvard for more than twenty years. Emerson was accused of being a heretic, a pantheist and a disbeliever. His crime: excessive candor. “I think no man can go with his thoughts about him into one of our churches without feeling that what hold the public worship had on men is gone, or going,” he said. “It has lost its grasp on the affection of the good and the fear of the bad.”

Could not the same statement be made to students graduating from Christian theological schools in 2008? Today’s students face a secularized society. They must confront fallen church leaders, abuses of power, public distrust, disbelief and even hostility. And yet students are applying in annually increasing numbers. They are graduating and pursuing traditionally religious vocations—becoming deacons, pastors or ministers—but they’re also bringing their faith to secular vocations. In an age in which sermons are podcast, today’s theological schools face the task of preparing their students to be both of the world and in the world. Graduates must take on an America polarized by atheism and religious extremism. They must demonstrate that faith still has a place even as they recognize the difficulty of defining the role faith will play in the twenty-first century.

Since 2002, according to the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), enrollment at its accredited member schools has been slowly climbing.
time, the face of Christian divinity schools has changed from when Emerson told a group of young men that “Faith makes us, and not we it, and faith makes its own forms.” Today’s students are female as well as male, and they are generally older than the theological students of the past.

Fergason is pursuing a Master of Divinity degree that will take her five years to finish. When she completes her education, she wants to become an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ—even though her church frustrates her when it comes to making changes. “Sometimes I’ll come home and want to bang my head against the wall,” she said with respect to how long it takes the church to debate new policies. She’d like to see more active roles for young people, with less red tape.

Straining to be heard over the screech of the espresso machine in the Harvard Coop café one morning, Fergason, who graduated from Wellesley College, said that when she tells peers what she’s studying, they sometimes seem put off: “You kind of are on the defense, in that you feel like you need to explain. [But] I need to be able to speak as a Christian and not apologize for it.”

Brian Rossbert, a tall, contemplative man who exudes a rural honesty, also has encountered difficulties when he has told peers he’s working toward becoming a pastor in the United Methodist Church. “Their first reaction is they’re kind of taken aback…They don’t know what to think,” said Rossbert, who is enrolled at Wesley Seminary School in Washington, D.C.

The introspective Rossbert came to his calling while working in the elbows-out environment of Capitol Hill for a congressman from his home state of Colorado. In December 2006, before Rossbert made his career change, a group of young professionals at a D.C. apartment party was hashing out the political implications of Senator Tim Johnson’s brain hemorrhage when Rossbert was asked his opinion on the matter. Did he think the Democrats would lose their majority in the House and Senate if Johnson died? Would a Republican from South Dakota be selected to take his place?

“I think we all just need to remember that this man is a human being with a family,” Rossbert said.

The party fell into awkward silence. His faith infused his reaction, Rossbert said. “At the time [I thought] I was being a bit rude, but I felt it was something that needed to be said.” It didn’t take him long to realize that he was not meant for politics. “I came to this place where faith life and work life came together,” he said. “I was thinking of a vocation where I could express my faith, where I could work for justice, work for peace…I took a class to test the waters, and I found a church and a calling.”

Theological students like Rossbert seem to feel a pressure to defend their decisions and their faith not only from peers but from society at large.

Theological students like Rossbert seem to feel a pressure to defend their decisions and their faith not only from peers but from society at large. The inhospitable climate is manifest in Christopher Hitchens’s recently published God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything. As of September 2007 God Is Not Great had spent twenty weeks on The New York Times’ nonfiction best-seller list. In his May 2007 review,
Michael Kinsley wrote that “[Hitchens] has written, with tremendous brio and great wit, but also with an underlying genuine anger, an all-out attack on all aspects of religion.”

I asked Fergason what she thought of Hitchens’s anger and of his conclusion that the United States should become a more secular society. While conceding the abuses of “bad” religion that have disillusioned many, she said she agrees with her professor Jim Wallis, author of God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It, who has written that the answer to bad religion is not secularism. Fergason cited her long-term girlfriend as an example of someone who has been “burned by Christianity,” because—among other reasons—she has not felt welcomed in many Christian communities. At the same time, Fergason described her partner as a very spiritual person, someone whose needs perhaps are not best served by a pure secularism.

Some divinity-school students are grappling with the question of how to express their religious beliefs in non-ministerial capacities. While Fergason and Rossbert both want to become pastors, one of Rossbert’s classmates, thirty-one-year-old Ingrid McIntyre of Nashville, is still searching. “I’m leaving Wesley October 12th,” McIntyre wrote in an e-mail, “to head out into the world (quite literally) to explore myself, other faith traditions, other cultures firsthand…more of a pilgrimage than a ‘trip’…I want to take time to listen for the (current) calling on my life.” McIntyre has entertained the idea of leading group trips in developing countries, among other occupations, and believes her pilgrimage—from Scotland to India—will help determine her vocation.

Natalie Austrian, a fifty-seven-year-old student at the Boston University School of Theology, is also uncertain what she wants to do after graduation. A second-career student who came to theological school after working for nonprofits and private businesses, Austrian knows only that whatever she decides to do will involve “making religion really active in people’s lives.”

Theological schools have responded to a student population that wants to merge secular pursuits with faith by offering unique courses and concentrations. Yale Divinity School lists a course called Environmental Theologies, which explores various theological responses to environmental concerns. At Vanderbilt University Divinity School, students can take part in the Carpenter Program in Religion, Gender and Sexuality.

Many schools still offer traditional pursuits, such as the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology’s survey course in the Old Testament. However, even conservative theological institutions acknowledge the evolving landscape. The Aquinas Institute of Theology, a Roman Catholic School in St. Louis, Missouri, explains on its website: “While we are loyal to Church teachings, we are not satisfied with the short answers. We strive to grasp the deeper meanings of our rich faith tradition and apply them to 21st-century questions.”

At the Boston University School of Theology, Assistant Dean John H. Berthrong shook his head in wonder at the transformation of the student body he’s witnessed in his nineteen years at the institution: “When I went to seminary, almost everyone was twenty-two, twenty-three. If they were forty years old, you would have dropped dead,” he said. Wearing a Hawaiian-print shirt, cargo pants and leather sandals, Berthrong could as easily have been on the deck of a cruise ship as in his jumbled office. While e-mails mounted in his in-box, he leaned back in his chair to speak with enthusiasm about what his students—both young and old—were doing with their degrees.
Since the early 1990s, Berthrong said, he’s observed a trend of students taking secular jobs after graduation. Some go to work for nonprofit organizations. Others pursue degrees in law or business and use their theological backgrounds to promote ethical practices in their chosen fields. Berthrong described one student—a former journalist—who returned to school with the idea of becoming a grant writer.

Asked what Martin Luther King Jr., one of BU’s most illustrious graduates, would think of the place today, Berthrong said, “I think he’d recognize the school. It’s hard to say. I think he’d be happy to see more women come in.”

At Harvard Divinity School, Dean William A. Graham said the school has expanded its faculty to keep pace with the diverse needs of the student body. “Nobody now can escape understanding better and often working with other religions,” Graham said. “Many forces today are interfaith social campaigns.”

Even as change swirls around them, some students still have their eyes firmly fixed on tradition. Dan Brook, twenty-four, a student at the Boston University School of Theology, aspires to be a pastor in a Methodist church in the Midwest, just like his mother. Soft-spoken to the point of inaudibility, Brook seems the kind of guy who would not only empty his pockets for the man playing guitar in the subway but would miss his train searching for that last loose quarter. When he graduates, Brook—who marvels at the “wide variety of thought and opinion” he’s encountered while at BU—will go home and preach.

Some theological schools, such as the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Myerstown, Pennsylvania, still prepare their students exclusively for traditional roles. The seminary’s website cites a mission to develop “servant leaders for effective ministry in a broken and complex world by nurturing rigorous minds, passionate hearts, and Christ-centered actions.”

In tending to this “broken and complex world,” theological schools and students continue to come face-to-face with questions about the robustness of Christianity in the United States. The past year has seen the loss of Evangelical church leader and televangelist Jerry Falwell, and the equally influential Reverend Billy Graham is in his late eighties. Even political heavyweight Pat Robertson, author of Miracles Can Be Yours Today, has been losing clout. In the Catholic church, the molestation scandal is still impacting fund-raising, attendance and parishioners’ trust in clergy. Indeed, while enrollment at theological schools overall is up, enrollment at Catholic-affiliated institutions declined by 6.3 percent in 2006.

For her part, Ferguson believes criticisms and questions “should inform you to be pissed off,” but not to abandon faith completely. Her iced coffee now forgotten on the wobbly table, she emphasized the need for Christianity to keep pace with the times. “I love talking about this stuff because our generation is sick and tired of one voice,” she said. “I think more and more for our generation the creed doesn’t work anymore.”

As Christian theological students look forward, they might also be advised to look back. Although almost 170 years have passed since Emerson delivered his infamous address, the words ring true for a new generation: “What am I? and What is? asks the human spirit with a curiosity new-kindled, but never to be quenched.”

Dan Brook at Marsh Chapel.
One December afternoon in the cozy conference room of Picture Park’s loft office, director Vladimir Minuty opened the preproduction meeting for his upcoming shoot. Six other filmmakers settled into their upholstered chairs, as behind them the Boston skyline darkened. The seats were plush, but the scene was not exactly corporate.

The participants ribbed each other and laughed, dipping freely into a jar of Dum-Dum lollipops on the table. “This shoot is going to be a doozy,” Minuty said, “but you won’t be filming me running around naked.” Everyone chuckled at the inside joke.

The group addressed the need for extras, and plenty of them. Someone recommended that the background talent be reminded to dress warmly. Minuty and his assistant director discussed the importance of efficiency during the Friday session, because one of the main actors would be available for only the first two hours of the six-hour shoot. Minuty then went over the need for an electrician, sound person and makeup artist—preferably one skilled at
bruises. “The look of this thing is going to be dirty. That’s the intention. That’s the story,” he said.

Minuty’s story was one of twelve filmed in the greater Boston area during 2007. Each month, one of twelve local filmmakers shot a ten-minute short. They then assembled the segments into a soon-to-be-released independent feature, aptly titled 12. In style and subject matter, the vignettes vary widely—as one might expect from twelve directors with twelve different visions. Minuty’s short, “December,” features a homeless man confronting his doppelgänger. Megan Summers, director of “July,” crafted a story of voyeurism. Scott Masterson, the originator of the project and director of “January,” chronicled the effects of insomnia. Yet, like Paris, je t’aime or Four Rooms, the completed feature is a coherent sum of its parts, in this case described by The Phoenix as “the big-screen equivalent of a patchwork quilt.”

Beyond the immediate scope of each short, the goal was collaboration. The twelve directors often served as crew members for films other than their own. And as the filmmakers in their various capacities spurred the project to completion, the narratives off-camera had nearly as many twists as the stories onscreen.

For 12, Scott Masterson drew inspiration from the musician Sufjan Stevens, who was trying to record fifty albums, one for each U.S. state. Masterson decided to do one film for each month of 2007. From the start, he made sure that the film would foster significant collaboration among filmmakers in the Boston area; he said he saw the project as a co-op of sorts. Within a month of the November 2006 organizational meeting, the shorts were assigned and the premises set. A specific tree would appear in each film, symbolizing the passage of time as the seasons changed. To further ensure cohesion, the filmmakers decided that several of the characters would show up at multiple times. They built a map with the different months and characters, weaving in the leads as supporting actors in other stories. Thus began the yearlong creative process.

Masterson had wanted to make movies since he was eleven years old. Presently, he works as an assistant director on a variety of commercial projects, including ads and music videos. In April 2006 he won first prize at the Howard Stern Film Festival for his short “Radio Play” and received a script deal through Horizon Films. His credits also include several directing stints on the NESN reality program.
The shoot that October weekend was a long one. Filming had begun early on Saturday: 7 a.m. at the Glass Slipper, a strip club in Chinatown, as the last of the all-night revelers stumbled out the door. The crew had worked quickly so the club could reopen for its midday rush. By mid-morning on Sunday, the day’s second shoot was already under way. At the Lizard Lounge in Cambridge, Summers bustled about, issuing greetings and answering questions while the crew began the laborious process of laying the tracks for the dolly, then checked the lighting.

Summers worked through lunch, tackling a wardrobe issue with an extra named Fifi. “I need you to wear something summery,” Summers told her. “Short sleeves, short skirt… All day, indoors and out, the extras had been shivering, clad in summer clothing in the blustery October conditions.

After their lunch, the crew resumed staging the scene, giving extras their blocking and making sure they stood in the right spots. Stewart Adam, a Boston-based sound mixer who usually works on commercial projects but had volunteered to help Summers reshoot, checked volume levels.

Summers issued directions in a faux-serious tone: “Yeah, take your jacket off. Who does not have an alcoholic beverage?”

“I don’t,” the makeup designer said with a laugh, unloading brushes and train cases as she hurried to touch up faces.

Then it was time for the first shot. While the extras bobbed their heads in time, the band played its song unmiked—the vocals would be dubbed in later. After Summers ran through several takes, the crew rushed to set up the dialogue scene at the bar.

The smell of garlic filled the basement lounge from the adjacent kitchen, in full swing for Sunday brunch in the upstairs restaurant. Summers approached her leading actress. “You’re still a quirky voyeur, but this is just the beginning,” she said.

Masterson said he had tapped Summers for one of 12’s directing slots because of her signature style as a storyteller, plus her technical skill and her resolve. That tenacity in particular proved useful when she had to reshoot. “The crew and cast were remarkable,” she said. “Everyone did the best they could under the situation.” Still, the challenges were real. “I’ve never remade a film, so it was very difficult,” she said.

But that cold day in the Lizard Lounge, she kept at it, seemingly unfazed. She turned to one of the extras, “Brian, when he says, ‘Are you fucking insane?’ that’s your cue to...
cross.” The other extras laughed, and
the crew repositioned the camera for
over-the-shoulder shots of the penguin-
tattooed bartender.

Vladimir Minuty’s “December”
follows a homeless man on New Year’s
Eve as he battles with the devil. But
the character’s story actually begins the
preceding January, when Masterson’s
lead asks the actor who will become
Minuty’s lead what his New Year’s
resolution is and he replies, “Don’t let
the devil get me.”

Minuty has worked on many
independent films, with a variety of
filmmakers, including the Academy
Award-winning documentarian Errol
Morris. For “December,” Minuty anti-
cipated a challenging final session of
filming. The crew had to shoot a night
scene with the electrics set just so for
the fight with the devil.

The crew arrived on location just
behind the Boston Museum of Fine
Arts around 3:30 p.m. Snow and mud
covered much of the ground. Crew
members unloaded a Budget truck
filled with gear and started to set up.
The trick was to make the lighting suffi-
ciently dark while still allowing the
camera to pick up the actors’ facial
expressions. While crew members
worked on that task, Minuty took his
lead behind the craft tent to rehearse
his lines. (The same actor plays both
the lead and the devil.)

As time ticked on, crew members
migrated about, setting up cameras
and other equipment. Several stopped
by the tent for freshly delivered pizza.

Meanwhile, the actors rehearsed their
choreographed fight for Minuty one
last time, with the collective hope that there’d be
weeping and gnashing of teeth but no surprises
when the camera rolled.
others, the new wave of films includes *The Lonely Maiden*, an upcoming project starring Morgan Freeman and William H. Macy—slated to be filmed just down the street from Minuty’s “December,” he said.

As for his part in 12, Minuty told one blogger that it was “one of the greatest professional experiences of my life.” Like all the directors, he wore several different hats during the filming of the various segments. “It’s getting back into the school setting, learning from each person, rotating roles,” said Minuty of his shifting positions in the crew. “I’ve assistant-directed a bunch, done storyboards [for other shorts]... You pull from the talent [that you have].”

Each instance of collaboration, each story and subtext, each carefully rendered scene, every actor, crew member and director contributed to Masterson’s objective. He hoped for a set of shorts that would reflect a range of artistic visions while melding into a unified whole. From conceptualization to finished product, he wanted deep cooperation. In that, despite the vagaries of weather and circumstance, he accomplished what he set out to do.

In the end, viewers and critics will determine the film’s success. Watch for it in festivals this year. In the meantime, don’t let the devil get you.
The youngest aunt descended upon me as soon as I entered the room. “Oh my God, your hair is so short,” she said. “And you’ve lost weight.” She looked to my grandmother for confirmation while I forced a smile and prepared myself for the barrage to come. “Is it asking too much to see a young girl eat well?”

“They pick up all the wrong habits,” interjected another aunt. “Look. The shoes she is wearing are so inappropriate for her age.”

There were no greetings, no words of welcome, just a cool assessment of my appearance. I was eight years old. Even now, at twenty-two, it’s hard to imagine how I was supposed to defend the choice of one shoe over another, much less withstand the onslaught of judgment that took place every time I was in the company of my large extended family. The substance was generally the same, even though the focus might shift. It could be the growth of my fingernails, and whether or not I’d chosen to apply polish. If I had, the shade would be critiqued. Or my grandmother would step forward to feel the fabric of my T-shirt or comment on my use of accessories or, more pointedly, the lack thereof. No matter what needed looking into—dinner half-prepared, grandfather’s requests for more tea, my youngest cousin’s screams for attention—the spotlight zeroed in on me as I stood like a mannequin in front of the women in my family. Finally, having had their fill, they would turn away, leaving me to my tears and the feeling that I would never measure up.

Even today, I’m not certain why I was the focus of so much negative attention. I was not unloved, and surely I was not the only one of my cousins with grievances. Family dynamics played a part in why I was singled out, but I was also—then as now—someone who did not fit the mold of the ideal daughter, especially in my traditional, patriarchal family. I chose jeans over feminine pastel dresses. I said what I thought. Then there was my complexion: In many Indian
I thought.

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There, away from critical eyes, I slowly started to accept myself. I began to understand how to actively defend my choices, which was a good thing because when I went home for breaks, things still were not easy. As time went on, the gist of the comments shifted from my physical appearance to less tangible matters. There was "concern" as to what my next step would be. Amid the warm smells and otherwise hospitable conditions of family gatherings, I would be peppered with questions: If I insisted on a career, then why not a traditional one? Why not become an engineer, a doctor, a lawyer? In reality, nothing would have pleased them more than to see me turn into a meek, dutiful homemaker. In marriage—and that of course to a man of their choosing—I still had the chance to become an ideal daughter and granddaughter.

To them, it was near blasphemy when I decided to pursue a master's degree abroad. But by the time I received my acceptance letter, I cared less about what they thought then and henceforth, and more about what the future might hold for me. The move might strain even further my already difficult relations with them, but I wasn't about to change my plans.

Now more than ever, I have become conscious of what I want and how I want it. It no longer stings the way it did that, no matter what I do, it will not be right in the eyes of my extended family. I recognize the trade-offs. Now that I'm halfway around the world, I've paid a price in the physical distance from people I love—particularly in being so far from my mother and father. Yet, as the tears dry, I find myself a stronger person. To keep myself that way, I am cautious about sharing the details of my personal life with my family. That detachment has been reinforced by the fact that I am not all that hungry for their acceptance anymore. I am no longer that small eight-year-old girl standing frozen in front of them.

So when my grandmother calls one winter morning to see how I am doing, I don't know what to tell her. A piece of my heart warms upon seeing her number on my caller ID, but all that come out are superfluous utterances: I am fine, thank you, I hope everyone at home is good.

"Have you eaten breakfast?" she asks. "With some hot milk, I hope."

When I reply yes, she persists. "What will you be eating for lunch? What progress have you made with your culinary skills?"

I can make edible food for myself. Not tasty, but edible. I mumble a response: "Probably some rice and soup."

"Have you spoken to your parents lately?"

"I talked to Mummy and Papa yesterday."

An uncomfortable silence ensues. My grandmother is too removed from my present life to be able to ask questions, and I am too guarded to fill her in. In an attempt to cut short the difficult conversation, I croak out an apology. "Ma, I am a little busy now," I say.

She tells me she understands. Her last words before she hangs up are "Don't hesitate to call if you need anything."

I put the phone down—sad, but really not so sad. Is this what is meant by letting go?
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