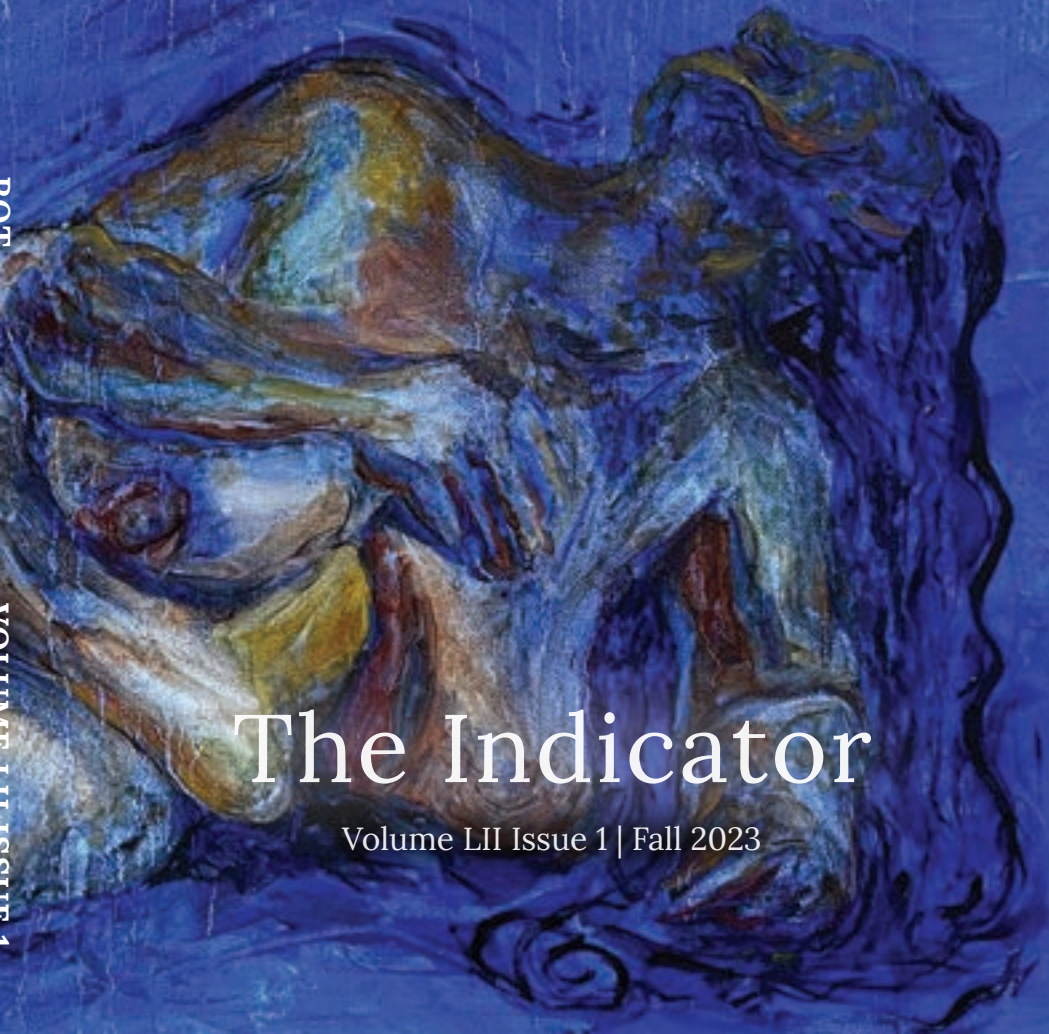


THE INDICATOR

ROT

VOLUME LII ISSUE 1

ROT



The Indicator

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Mel Arthur, Gabrielle Avena, Sarah Wu

Rot, in simultaneous existence with crumble, disintegrate, stain, decompose, corrupt, sink, worsen, wither, descend, fester, and spoil. To inhabit the space of terrible beauty where the world and the bodies that exist within it circle around what has been made absent. Rotted as an attempt to reduce oneself into a personhood that seeks to touch and know touch. To be rotting, as in a state of constant overturning beginning within outward, to be a subject that denies being fixed. Rot: sketching modes of upheaval, falling into the earth, branching off into the creation of a new horizon. We are interpellated by Rot, called in to be an object that makes its way into a subject. Therefore to be in rot, to rot, be rot then becomes the way we fall into inevitability and always always being incomplete. Rotting articulates what it means to teach "lost[ness] in the world" [Hartman, 227]. It is the line between possibility and possible. It outlines the edges of existence, ever so often allowing us to witness not only our precarity but our aliveness.

- mel // forever insufferable

Like any garden, this issue is full of dying things. Beneath the splendor of flora there lie underneath: earthworms wriggling their little bodies through the dirt, larvae liquifying the tissue of the corpses of their flower-comrades, feeding the birth of new buds. Let yourself wander through the weeds. Maybe you will find a half-bitten, once-sweet, once-shared apple left to stain in the sun. Or maybe, off the beaten path, you will catch a tiny spider in the light, spinning the fragility of memory in its web. Listen to the chime announce the passing of the wind, of time, of the kind of corrosion that occurs outside / between / not simply within the body.

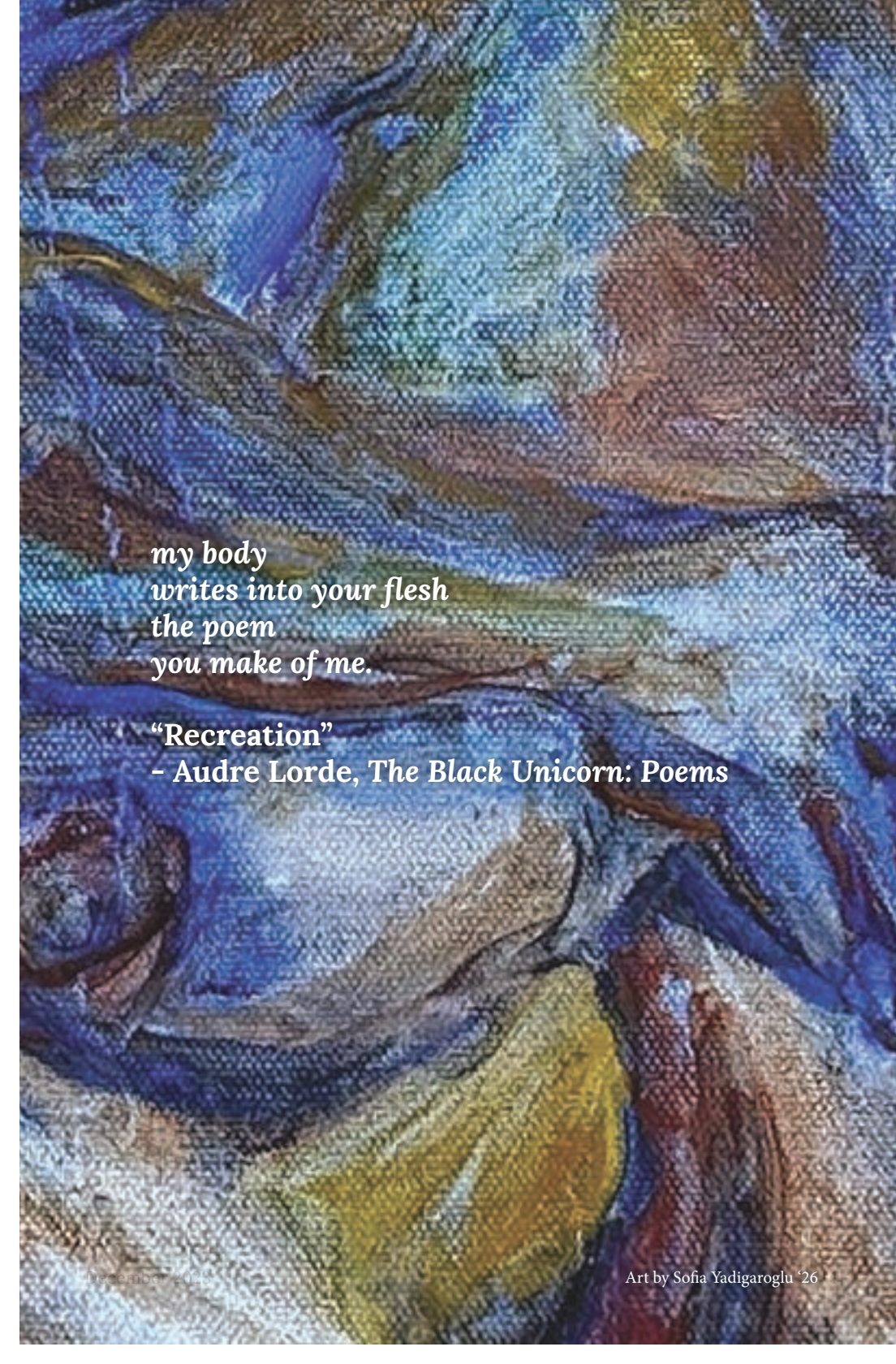
The poet Ross Gay--gardener extraordinaire--has a lovely thought against timelessness: that which withstands the test of time is bad for the environment, is bad for life. Let us, for a moment, consider all that decay makes possible, all that rot helps grow.

- gabby // (de)composing

We come up with this theme during the third Indicator meeting and I, for one, will admit that I was very against this theme (thanks Cece) as rot often associates with the angsty writers trope. It seems to be a concurrent pattern where two prompts go against each other, and the one I want (alas, pedagogies of touch) is not chosen—

- yet still, the impression of rot hints inside my unconsciousness. When I fall asleep, I slip into uneasy, reckless dreams of bodies. Rot seeps into these piles of dream-bodies, crusts them with moss and foreign substances—the rot attached to the living
- and I think of the opposing action, to scrub away, to grab white soap and repeat the motion of sanitizing; back & forth, back & forth, the skin peeling off. To think of a cyborg—skin gleaming in silver, hard, perfect, slimmed down to efficiency. and
- to erase rot means to erase living. I think of rotting as a way of excess living in the world. I think about rot as part of fleshy skin and the slack-jawed post-mortem grin of a skeleton whose body stinks, the inevitability of being categorized, defined as organic.
- and so, in my inebriated, sleepy state, I come to this conclusion: let us embrace the angst
- because after all, we are all just rotting.

— sarah // written at 2:30 am, edited for sanity at 3 pm



*my body
writes into your flesh
the poem
you make of me.*

“Recreation”
- Audre Lorde, *The Black Unicorn: Poems*



Art by Jacinta Smith '25

PROPERIAMPHIMETAPHYSICS

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In the beginning, God took the greatest dump of all Time, squeezed time and space through the white hot speck of what would be the universe. You can't talk about the beginning of the universe without making it sound like a fairytale. A myth, if you will. For in the beginning, there was time and space, and light could travel a meaningful distance in the space of a second divided into a number with forty-three zeros in it. Space was divided into seconds and time was measured by the distance traveled outward by that white hot speck of light. During that time—or space, for time is measured by space and space is measured by time—there was nothing. Nothing physical, at least, in whatever sense that word has when the laws of physics had yet to be combed into perfect fractals. Because in the white hot speck when God took the biggest dump of his Life and squeezed the universe (which can be compared to divine fecal matter because the universe is but a fraction of his power and energy and Being) through a point that isn't just a point (there was nothing but now there was something and a point is a paradoxical nothing because a point has no mass or size but is nonetheless a thing), it was too hot and small and extreme for the laws of physics to be obeying themselves.

Within ten seconds the universe expanded from nothing to a meter to a hundred-light-years wide. We can talk about seconds here because a second is an absolute construct defined by the vibration of a certain atom in certain conditions (*not* by the amount of time it takes Newton's apple to fall a certain distance from the tree to the Earth), a definition which can be described and transcribed and transmitted, then replicated absolutely (if theoretically) so that even when there were no atoms, a second is a second is a second and in a second, light (which is absolute, in both the physical and some might say gospel sense of the word) travels a distance greater than what the average person might have traveled in a lifetime a century ago but certainly not greater than the aggregate distance traveled by an middle-to-upper class human in their first fifty years of life in the twenty-first century. In any case, during the first ten seconds of the Beginning there were billions of Kelvins and quarks and antiquarks (the physicists gawk and cork the matter and anti-matter into stuff and anti-stuff).

Hot enough to melt a diamond—a once-visceral image obliterated by a quick Google search, which now enables you to see

diamonds melt before your eyes on a small laptop screen. They look tiny, the red hot specks, and you watch in your sweats, sitting in air con, no heat no smoke no diamond carbon dioxide to breathe and you think: hot enough to melt a diamond? That's not that hot.

For hundreds of thousands of years—longer than the existence of the human race—the universe cooled. It cooled rapidly, but three-hundred-and-eighty-thousand years is still a long time. The universe cooled until it was hot enough to melt a diamond, then to whatever coolness the universe is now, and during that time God napped. He did not set a timer because he could tell how far along his concoction was getting to even while he napped, and so he Napped while part of his consciousness kept tabs on what was going on with this project of his, which was and apparently still is mostly helium and hydrogen. He knew it would turn out well (he still couldn't help wanting to poke at the air bubbles) and ultimately kept his hands off of things until everything settled into place. To curb his restlessness he took a Nap, maybe chatted to the angels and spirits and maybe even to Christ the Son (depending on your Christology), while resting in the sunless light and in the non-matter non-anti-matter that existed then, whatever existence means in a time outside time and a space without space.

BECOMEINGTO

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here;
take before
you, see, behold
extravagance extraordinarily unceasing in splendor
traces lingering without diffusion
fragrances eternally unfolding; everlasting altar
all yours to take, this this and that

if only you had more hands to grasp it all
if only a mind to comprehend
if only your eye could see past the horizon,
'round the whole of it and back again then only would you be
able to realize

there's no horizon, the vanishing point rushing at you till—
abolish distance explode proportion

collisions of echoes
whispers like the crashing of waves
or maybe the thunder a mere murmur

but the raindrops are mirrors here
or maybe the lights themselves—light itself
(scattered into a million fractals, fragments)
fall as they do
collide - shatter - merge
once and once and all again

illumination so blinding

milk and honey flowing overflowing flooding that

this must be

— *what would it feel like throwing your head back to take —*

the place

— *wondering can only get you so far —*

so a touch grazing
skin and skin meeting coming together at the seams
fissures knit open and cut back into

there you have now become,

but there
a dullness round the edges
rust tarnish seeping through
spices puncturing incense stifling
oxygen choking hazardous

too much much too much

who told you could would be able

and now

gnashing of teeth
wallow in rain unending
glass shards plummeting embedding
nectar congeal blood coagulate
fossilize bury bone

it becomes you become it

transubstantiation of a debased kind

ROADKILL

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The best thing about having
two eyes wriggling around in your
head like minnows is that they
have already learned to blur
and your retina is cracked and crumbling
into mildew that grows across water
like milk skin, water that soaks bunnies
to their bones, elixir to some
torn tissue but claims their
bodies all the same

The best thing about having
gray matter bouncing around
that bowling-ball socket is that
it has already learned to turn green,
DNA braids unraveling, dancer's ribbons
fallen out of their plaits and
ripping into the wind, until
the wind is all that ever
was and is and will be

So those bunnies, bone-soaked,
will be food for the worms and
crows, gobbled up by the dirt
until all that is left is a
milk-white eye that looks more
like a marble and will sag like
a balloon

So that bowling-ball socket, ruptured,
oozes swing sets and pawprints,
frog graves and first loves
piano lessons and novel plots
and a cranberry relish recipe.

Out dribbles passwords and
birthdays, nightmares and
crochet stitches, forgotten
Build-A-Bears and how to spell onomatopoeia

It spills sunburns and pulled teeth,
roots growing into the ground like seeds
and another body to be built from its branches.



Art by Cecelia Amory '24



I'M SORRY, I NEED A MOMENT —

Gabrielle Avena | gavena25@amherst.edu

I mean — I need a moment to move through — an image to see with — an orange on an altar, rotting on speedlapse — maybe, or the silver snow crest of a scar — that melts into skin — forming the film of forgetting — what I mean to say is — I need to keep my memories fresh — I need to hold such small grains of salt — pressed longingly against the tight mouth of the wound — for I need a moment — to remain pure over time — to stay where — it is, still — and unchanging, for I love best — I think, through encasement — like when you pin a butterfly to a board — and keep not the insect but the fact of its beauty — or when I write my sister into a story — and preserve not her life but the fact of her pain — I tell myself — what is preservation, if not care — and make it my profession — I make an archive of my mind — 'cause once I read that the more you reach — towards the past, the less it remains within your grasp — as your thoughts taint remembrance with their residue — so I tend to records like a gravekeeper — tends a body through gloved hands — though my boss says that we are only weeding documents — as one does in a garden, turning the tired soil — to seed the fruits of fresh delights — so perhaps what it means to keep a memory alive — is to let it die alongside you — let its skin bruise with time's touch — until it bursts open

— After Jane Wong



Art by Jacinta Smith '25



Art by Erxi Lu '24

SEEPING

Zoe Alarcon | zalarcon24@amherst.edu

i once thought my body was
empty of me, other than the light
buzz of energy, unease

until I learned the weight
of remembering could swallow
me if I didn't swallow it

open my heart as
the next ripple of time
propagated to join it in
the next degree of something

shed a little of the inability
To let go, feel the wind scrape
My throat like the bottles
when you blow across the top
and the sharp sensation escapes
your ears

my aunt says its useless
experiencing a crisis before it happens
but putting myself through it twice
let me articulate it quicker, more clearly
after the second time, i don't say

guilty assigning someone else
the exhausting task
of creating clarity of deep fear

there's no response to that question
just to let the sparks it cast
settle from their momentum
made small by the stretch of eternity

like i'm putting things off
but gaining the euphoria of
movement

held by roots drawn in me
by noises, words, and loves
remembered to navigate

hollow spaces
and live among them

DISAPPEAR

Kaela Liu | kliu26@amherst.edu

The five senses: touch, taste, sight, hearing, smelling. These five senses make up how we perceive the world. As we grow up, we accumulate experiences. These experiences teach us about how we should interact with our surroundings. We make memories. These memories make up our view of the world. They make us up.

◇

Every child knows their birthday. Every child, except, apparently, myself. The interaction started simply enough.

“What’s your birthday?” The nurse asked.

“April 5, 2012.”

The year was 2012.

“2007,” My mother corrected.

I nodded, ever so slightly perplexed and embarrassed, but mostly indignant. *I knew when my birthday was! My birthday had happened only a week ago. Why was my mother saying it was 2007?*

The next year, I turned 6. Up until then I had never fully understood that my age changed on an annual basis. I had been stretching time, pulling it between my fingers, willing to stretch out towards infinity. But it was snapping right before my eyes, tearing apart the same way a cheap rubber band does: tearing, tearing, then *snap!* The band becomes a line.

In the same way, I learned that time stretched out forward in one singular direction.

According to the world around me, I was growing up.

That realization began my desire to capture time.

So I began teaching myself how to freeze time. At first, the time I caught felt sticky, but somehow it wouldn’t stick to my fingers. I would reach out, grab a firstful of everything I knew. Mold it in my palm, and attempt to analyze it. I thought that if I could understand – I could recreate it – all of it – like an artist sketches

a moment into reality. However, the moments I captured moved through my hands like vapor, unwilling to solidify fully between the pressure of my outstretched palms. By the time I had it molded into a perfect ball, it was already dissipating into thin air. It seemed to me that once I had broken time – snapped flat like a rubber band – it could no longer hold anything concrete. Everything simply fell through, or disappeared.

Eventually I realized that I was catching the wrong thing. My hands were ineffective for time-catching, but perhaps time was impossible to catch. Instead, I learned how to catch something even better.

Instead of attempting to grab time with my hands, I would grab moments. I allowed these moments to enter my consciousness through my senses. My senses, unlike my hands, knew what a moment looked like, and they scooped up everything with ease. Working together, they created a memory.

So, I began collecting memories. Whenever I remembered to, I would take the memory my senses curated and store it besides the ever growing repertoire of memories I owned: my first time riding a bike. My brother's basketball-themed birthday party. That time my best friend and I built a pillow fort. My first time flying alone.

As I collected more and more memories, I lived through a couple more birthdays.

Whenever someone asked me to share something about myself, I would comb through my stack of memories and find my favorite one to display. Some people liked the memories I had – those people became my friends. Some did not, and those people faded from my life.

When I got bored just collecting memories, I started thinking about what I could create with them. These pieces of time I had been collecting – could they be collaged, like small scraps of paper, into something meaningful? I was the only one who knew the moments I held. What if, I thought, someone could know all of my memories. Would they then know how to be me?

I started experimenting – experimenting with what I knew. I would clear my mind, imagine myself as if I was an extraterrestrial alien placed into the body of a human, with all the experiences and memories of me.

For a moment I'd critique the world, thinking of everything that I know, scavenging my brain for every single memory I could

remember, pulling together the small memory Post-it notes I had collected from time.

However, one day, I lost my memories. It lasted only for a moment, or for an eternity, I could not tell. It was the instance when the blood in my body failed to reach my brain, my vision went blurry, my knees buckled, and I lost all consciousness. Then I was nothing. I was awake. But there was simply nothing. A heavy black cloud of emptiness that held me in place, yet extended outwards towards infinity. I had no senses, but I felt my entire surroundings. It was all black, but color never really existed. It was quiet, but I did not know what sound was. Everything that I ever knew was — *quiet. gone.*

Yet I had no knowledge of what I had lost. The band of time I had known, once snapped and straightened, had crumbled into a ball, one that fell through my hands like vapor, unwilling to solidify.

I woke up, gasping. I had fallen into my heater, having fainted momentarily onto my floor. That instinct, everything I knew came flooding back to me. I remembered, all at once, my name, my age, where I lived, who I was. It was as if everything that made up me had returned to me at that moment.

At that moment, I realized that I could not catch memories. The memories I had caught were only time pretending to take a finite form. But like time, memories snap, crumble, and

disappear.



Art by Desmond Shea '24

THE GREAT PEAT BOG BODY BONANZA OF WHO KNOWS WHEN AND WHO KNOWS HOW

Laura Almeida | lalmeida24@amherst.edu

It was the beginning of yet another end. It didn't like this; for one, being an it. There was a scream that resounded through the bubbling bog as it recalled, violently, its true life as a sprawl—us and *them* and I, ever-enmeshed, if not singular. It realized that scream ripped from its own lungs and it screamed again. *Come up for air*. But it couldn't stop screeching. Stupid. Hands flailed for a mere moment before extending out, through the mud-green water—a perfect mimicry of the human, swimming. Its astuteness was a point of pride. It told itself this as the surface became further rather than closer. LEGS. FUCK—is what it must have thought. For in a moment, its body unbent from the fetal position; snapped straight in a clean line, and in just a moment reaching the surface became no trouble at all. *Sssstupid stupid stupid STUPID*. AH. AH. I WILL BREAK THIS THING CLEAN IN HALF, is what it thought, clambering out of the murky water, AND THEN MYSELF WITH IT. Hate's shivering hot tooth plunged inward and the thing ceased to swim in the brief moment of agony where it discovered what it felt to be so pitiful, four-limbed, singular, quiet.

It started drowning again. Still was too much gelatin in its calcified husk of a head. Too much meat and not enough sprawling nerves, synapses; maybe all the ones it had were left wanting in their solitude. In grunts and cries and groans it pushed its way up the murky murky water hit its head on the driftwood screamed again *again* and when its stupid stupid head breached the water it spluttered and coughed and groaned like a falling trunk of tree onto the shore. The mud was slippery and it almost fell back in. It learned to curl its cracking appendages-of-appendages like an animal's claws. It stayed on the ground. For good measure it slammed its head, and then cringed at the squish of wet peat and bone. The air was thin and slippery and did not cling to the skin membrane. It considered jumping back in the bog just to feel the water once again. But it shivered incessantly, and to the point of paralysis. Quivering in place, it attempted the husk's impulse of breathing through the dual cartilaginous orifices—as though it even needed to. The skin membrane was more opaque than expected, but not very much, and invitingly damp. Hobbled, bonelessly, it swung leg by leg to sit on a stump of trunk.

On the stump it sat and sat, and, leaning back, almost arching over the wood, planted its back flat on the surface, and waited. And waited. And waited. And waited and waited and waited and waited and you *are all so green under the gills. Stand up.*

GET UP.

...

...

...Nothing else in the body liked that very much. Yet, as everything came from something, a piece of their spawning grounds remained with them forever, and it was this voice that would guide them on the journey back. Every sprawl had to return eventually. It wobbled, blearily, back up, in an attempt at a single body, sitting.

No! *Stand up. Be not weak in the knees, the moss below does not want you. The dermis prohibits easy transmission of matter.*

...

You will die waiting. Do not spread out. Stay sturdy. Bend only to snap back in. Cartilaginous.

Stop.

Boneful. Calcified, secure. You know naught of this; I do. We are nerve and this body our vertebral tunnel. Knuckle bowl. Cranium jelly. Pelvic; spore.

Don't understand.

Most coherent I can be is a few sentences before I transmit what all of you put in me.

No more.

No hope. Not for me. Learn. Help me. Learn.

It could not learn more than it always did—never-ending dialogue, direct neural transmission, running in rivers throughout. One taking precedence over all hurt. It hurts.

The body creaked up.

It had no more voice to scream with in the thin air so it played with the hinges of its jaw because that was what the body wanted in pain. For human flesh is bound to singularity it learns to stand upright on two legs so as to distinguish itself from the watery dirt it came from, but the hosts were not human and lacked in the teachings of the femur and the fibula and so crawled on all fours, and even the coordination for singular

motion of singular limbs then gave cause for Host through Body to jaw-hinge some more. *Where.*

Shut up. It hurts me too.

The body learned singularity in singularly stopping.

Where?

Even through coordinated refusal an uncontrollable ripple in pulse twitched the middle leftmost finger forth. Another ripple generated, not top-down but from within, and it learned fear. It crawled ahead, dragged bellyfirst across the tempting, soft, odorous earth. Hosts discovered more and more delights within. Barren leatherlike stomach. Cavities stretching inwards to the brain meat. Vulval folds resembled cousins. The body was as perfect as any human body could ever be. Feeling out, it questioned the remaining fat beyond the rib bones, another ripple in the conscience.

Reservoirs. Fat for the body, to stave off chill and death. Milk if with child. Host with a capital H shuddered them off. Keep moving.

hosts in lowercase hummed suddenly, pleasantly, at the foreignness of the human body, paradox, self-contained and self-replicating. Its skin dispersed light in the same delicious brown way of the earth; only a well-timed clench of ligament stopped it from using teeth to rip a bite off to bring inside with it. The crawl was taking too long. Trapped in the body, it fingered at meager muscle tissue, subcutaneous fat near wholly melted in the belly-scraping motion, scraps to chew for now; fingered, then, at the choice to call it 'fingered', and it began to shudder and shudder and shudder again until UGH. *Again?* And again and again and again and again and again and again and a

Stop

gain and a gain and again and a gain Piteous things. Babies. Infants! Sorry soup of children!

What is 'sorry'gain and again and again and again and a gain and again and *More than you can comprehend.* again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again and again and Stop It. Again and again and again STOP. STOP.

Do you know what this is crawling towards?

Pool Mother Death One
Release Soup Birth
Meat Mud Spore
Release
Again

And again, and again, and again. Yes. Now, move.

It moved as one. It moved deliriously. Lifting one appendaged appendage after the other, such simple builds for such suffocatingly self-contained beings, it crawled, arm-hand-knee-leg-arm, once-near-concave hominid belly, now full with anticipation, with wandering tendrils, mycelium mimicry, sloshing heartily along with want. An odor of stinking sex called back on a primal memory in the body of bodies to which it clicked its jaw and crinkled its brow-skin in delight. The bone was not of much use where speed was needed and so they let it break, pulsing beneath the epidermis in a roil that would roll the arms and belly how they needed them to move. Kin sprang around the moss, surrounding, enveloping, inviting, directing, leading to the precipice of a slop of bodies big and small directed by more of the *us* and *them* and *I* who were ready to die, take root, begin again. Primordial stew, the promise of maturation, nativity and burial, it dragged itself forth and slammed head-first into the acidic, muddy, slog of the bog.

THE MAW

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The sorrowful keening of the crowd pierced the clear, dry air on the plateau. They huddled together, staining the dusty ground with their crying and the clear air with their wailing. It was the one day of the year where they could grieve, the one day it would not slow them down.

The wanderers had returned to the Maw.

A rent in the land: jagged, and cruel like a wound upon the flat expanse of the dry highlands. Down below, a wisping grey-green fog swished about like a river of dandelion fluff, or the lethargic lifeblood of the world. Despite its tranquil innocuousness, one among the wanderers stared down at it with hatred. A hand, bony but strong, clenched on his shoulder. "Control yourself," she commanded. "It is long to dark."

The young man nodded, gritting his teeth.

They donned their masks with efficiency and precision, latches and clasps clicking together until the heavy constructions of leather, cloth, and metal were comfortably choking them. Pouches stuffed with perfumes and herbs bulged from the mask cheeks like organic protrusions. Their breath rasped out, while inhaling sanded their throats with spicy air. The young man's words were shredded and torn as they fought their way through the mask, emerging with a bestial coarseness.

"Let's torch it. Let the Maw choke on smoke. It deserves to die."

Behind the domes of milky glass, the older woman rolled her eyes. She was starting to suspect she chose a poor apprentice. "It's part of the cycle," she said back evenly, and the young man thought the mask made her sound as weak as she was old.

They put up their hoods, hooking them into the cloth so their necks and the backs of their heads were covered. There was not an inch of exposed skin.

"It eats us," the young man continued angrily. "It profits from our deaths. It's a monster."

"We profit from our deaths," the woman whispered to herself.

They drove thick spikes of metal into the ground with hammers, then securely knotted rope around them. They tied the other end around their waists, and looked over the edge of the Maw, where moonlight made the fog below into a river of spoiled milk. “Start falling,” the old woman commanded.

Their rappelling was cautious, but not difficult. The walls of the Maw had ample handholds and ledges to stand on. The young man went faster, letting himself drop farther each time he pushed off the wall. The old woman was calmer, keeping watch on the light of the moon, making sure it would be just above them when they hit the bottom, giving them the strongest light. There could be no fire in the Maw.

The air grew moist and sticky as they approached the not-fog. There was the faintest sound in the air, like the flapping of the most minute wings. Instinctual revulsion had the young man breathing shallowly, afraid his filters would fail, and he'd inhale the spores around him. The old woman, trusting her equipment, continued her deep breathes, filling her lungs and her muscles with precious air.

“The stonemasons are going to stop feeding the Maw,” the young man said suddenly, quiet words carrying through the silent night.

“And what is it the stonemasons will do, instead?” They could not see each other, only the shadowy outlines of moving spore clouds.

“They’re making boxes of stone, so the Maw cannot eat the dead.”

“And where will all the boxes of stone go? The stonemasons are more numerous than us, and more prone to death. How long until they are crushed beneath the weight of their dead? Will they make roads and walls of their boxes of stone? A city of their dead, ever growing larger and heavier until the living can no longer bear the weight? Let the cycle cycle. Let the dead disappear.”

“Into a grim gullet,” the young man spat back.

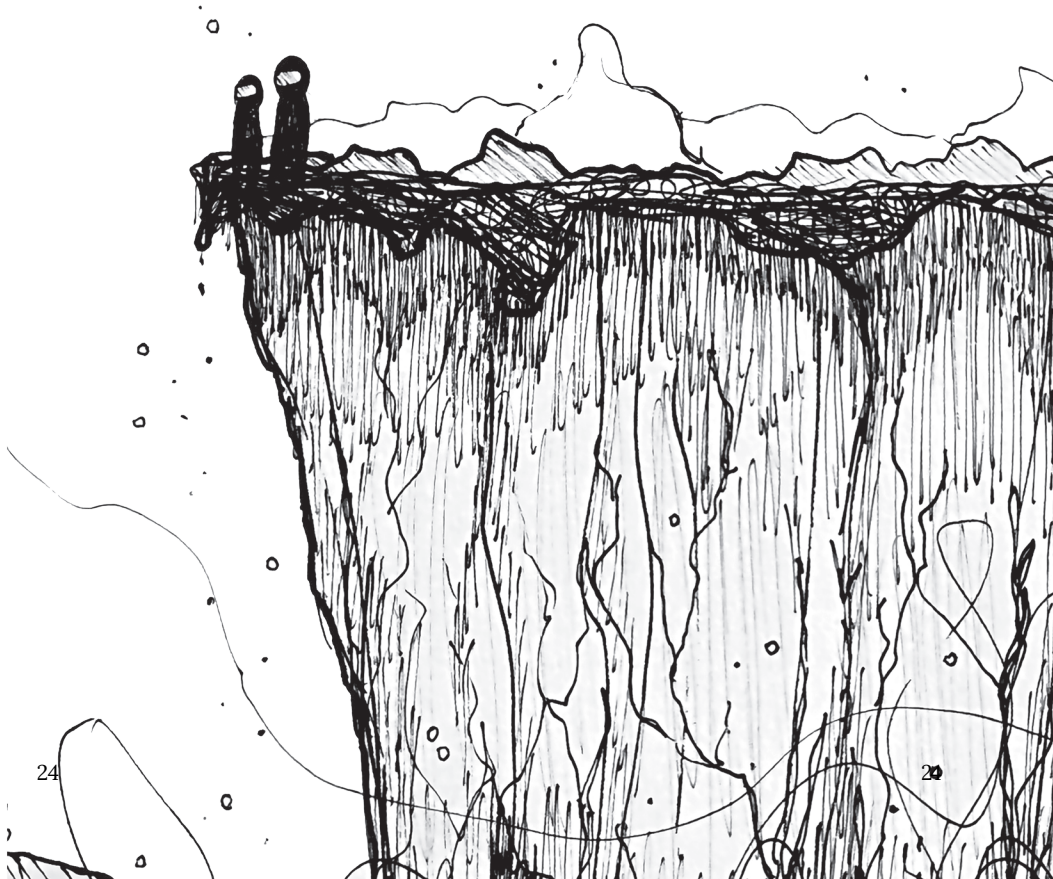
Their boots touched the bottom of the maw, sinking into an unseen mulch. The young man looked down uneasily, expecting the ground to collapse in and consume him at any moment. He had been raised on the barren plateaus—ground was supposed to be solid. The old woman noticed but made no comment—her

peace was long made with the components of her ancestors. In the ghostly moonlight, the Maw's flora looked alien, vines creeping up the walls and flowers bursting from cracks in the earth.

The two kept walking, hanging to the nearside, where the valuable bodies were—those who were respected, or powerful in life. Those were lowered into the Maw by rope. The uncar-ed-for's bodies were tossed in, where they hit the far wall, and split open to feed the Maw their viscera.

The old woman walked past an old body; Mawshrooms had encircled and consumed it. Their caps looked like fleshy tumors. While the subtle flapping of a single Mawshroom's gills was too quiet for humans to pick out, the countless number of them made a constant low susurrantion.

The two found the day's bodies, the oldest of them just under a year dead. In the few hours since they had been let down, the Mawshrooms spores had taken root in their flesh, and tiny



bulges like goosebumps promised they too would be consumed within time. The two picked at them for earrings, necklaces, bangles, and other valuables.

“Unnatural,” the young man hissed. “Disgusting.”

“It’s the most natural thing in the world.”

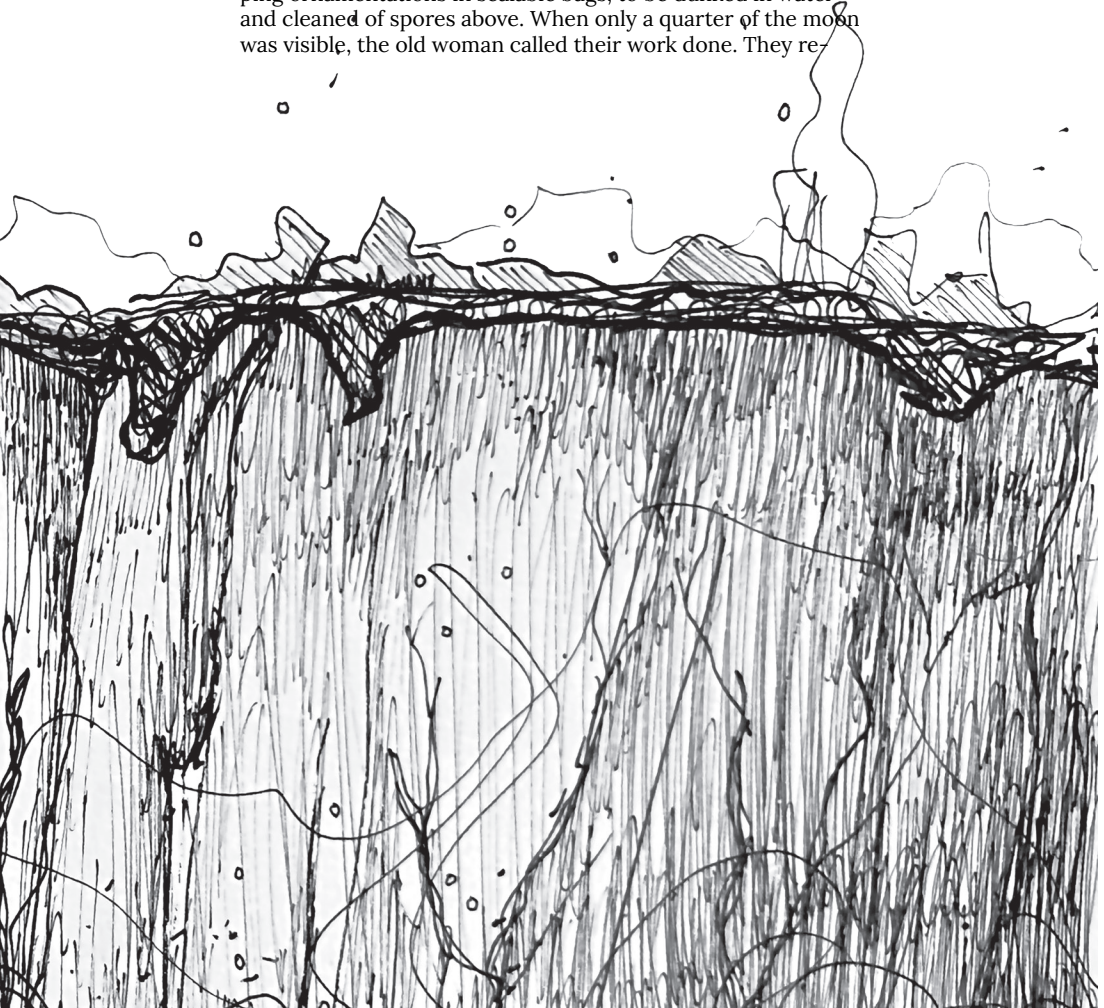
“It’s plants eating animals.”

“They’re more like animals than plants.”

“I know? That’s what I just said.”

The old woman rolled her eyes.

The graverobbers picked their way through the bodies, dropping ornamentations in sealable bags, to be dunked in water and cleaned of spores above. When only a quarter of the moon was visible, the old woman called their work done. They re-



turned to their ropes and climbed back up. The return was far more strenuous than the descent.

At the top, the old woman unlatched her mask, sat down, and enjoyed the clear air. She removed from her pocket a rolled cigar, lighting it with a practiced hand. She took a deep puff. The young man held out a hand, "Mind if I have one?"

The old woman raised an eyebrow, removed another cigar, lit it against her own, and handed it over. The young man stared at the ember.

"You've always refused them before," the old woman said, "Why now?"

The young man walked to the edge and stared down at the spores. "Don't you know these rot your lungs?"

He threw the lit cigar over the edge.

TO ROT

Willow Delp | wdelp26@amherst.edu

“Five general stages are typically used to describe the process of decomposition in vertebrate animals: fresh, bloat, active decay, advanced decay, and dry/remains.”
—Wikipedia

Fresh

To rot is to join the raspberries in my fridge (so sweet, so short-lived.) To rot is to resist preservation; to be boldly, maddeningly temporal.

Bloat

To rot is to defy conservation. You are no taxonomized animal, you are a fragile human being with such little time to live atop this earth until you inevitably return to its core.

Active Decay

To rot is to be biotic (such a clinical term for the vivid messiness of its definition!) To rot is to be biological, ecological, ontological. To rot is to fuse with nature, to tie your very essence into the beating heart of the planet.

Advanced Decay

To rot is to combat your own consumption, to disintegrate rather than to be devoured. To rot is to forsake beauty; to cast aside that endless pursuit.

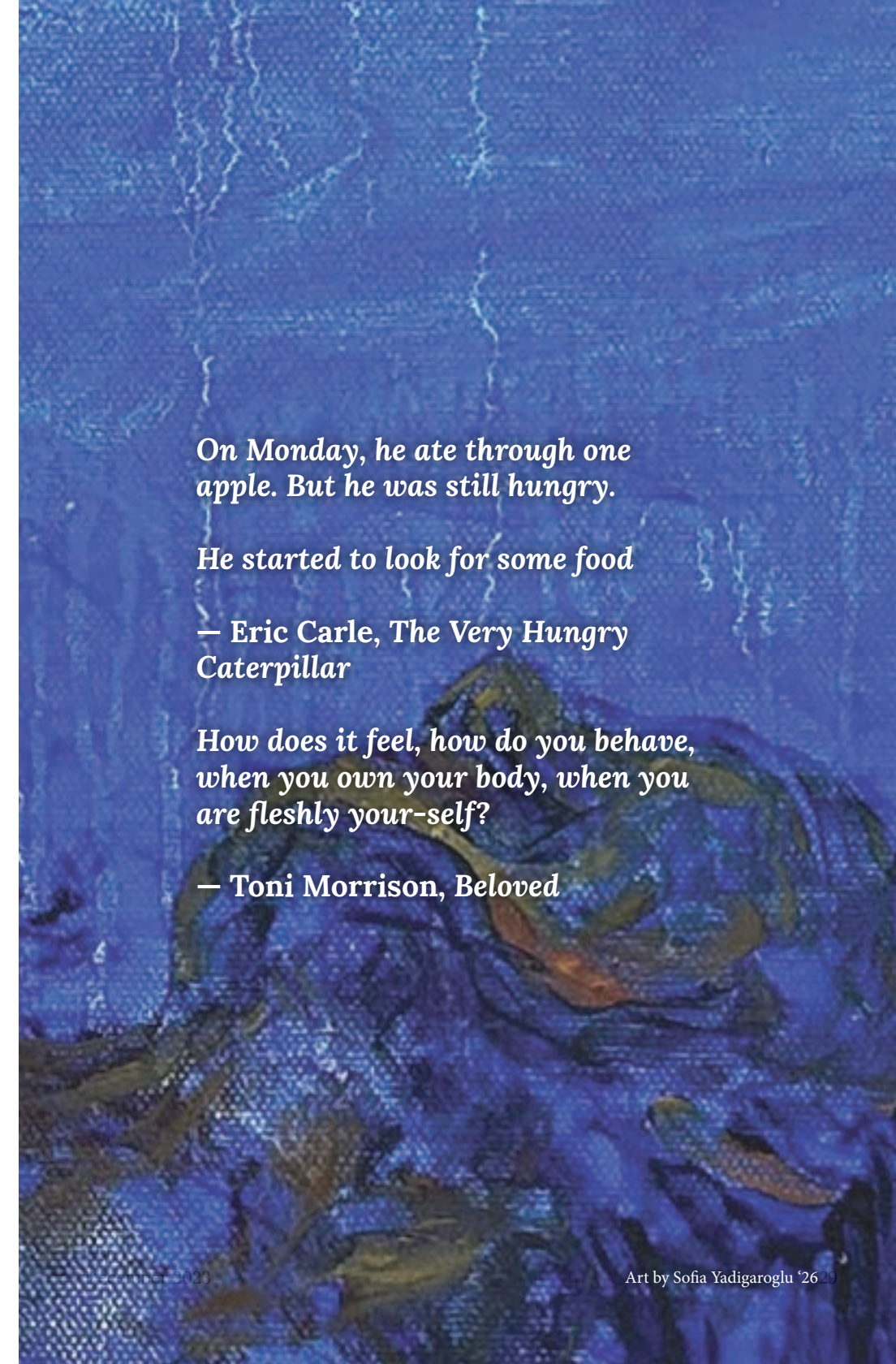
Dry/Remains

To rot is to sweat, bleed, and cry.

To rot is to live.



Art by Sofia Yadigaroglu '26



*On Monday, he ate through one
apple. But he was still hungry.*

He started to look for some food

*— Eric Carle, **The Very Hungry
Caterpillar***

*How does it feel, how do you behave,
when you own your body, when you
are fleshly your-self?*

*— Toni Morrison, **Beloved***



RUBY AND ROSE

Bea Agbi | bagbi26@amherst.edu

It began around the time I got back together with Booker. They thought he was too simple, too easy to read. *He wants what everyone else wants. To marry, have kids, buy a house down the street from where he grew up* – I guess Rose never thought that was what I wanted too.

The further Booker and I got into our relationship, the less I saw of Rose. They liked to say that they were busy working, and then – after getting the job in the city – busy preparing for the move. But I knew they were disappearing from my life because they couldn't stand to watch as Booker and I bought the house, had a kid, got pregnant with another... and I get why, but I also don't. I never really took Rose as the free-loading, adventure seeking type. Even though that was what they talked about while growing up, I always took it as an overcompensation. Of course, they had every reason to want to leave. By the end of high school, their parents had made it clear that any chance of reconciliation was shot. But... I suppose it felt a bit like reverse psychology. Like they were saying the opposite of what they wanted, because the truth felt too hard to bear.

I told them my suspicions, of course. Right before they left I said, *You're not always gonna want to run around forever*. They scowled, picked up their bag, and slammed the door, making the baby cry.

Of course, before Booker, we had our moments. But Rose and I survived because we never forgot that we needed each other. On the playground, when we found out that our favorite colors were red, we decided that we needed to stick together because of it. We renamed each other. Ruby and Rose. It began as a secret, between the two of us, but eventually the rest of the town caught on.

I'm not supposed to call them Rose anymore. Part of the process of becoming a more authentic version of themselves – they changed their birth name too. But if I say Rose on the inside, and their new name on the outside, I'm showing respect – both forms of my love.

A few weeks ago I got a text from them, saying they would be back in town, asking to meet up. When they asked where, I said, *The usual*. Now that I'm seeing them, I suppose the usual could have also been the diner, but we also came here a lot.

Booker told me, before I came here: *With friends like Rose, once you see each other, you fall back into the way things used to be.* But I wonder, which way things used to be? Like when we were children, and giggled at all the names we had come up with for our own ways of seeing the world? Or teenagers, when we laughed less but still slept next to each other, curled up on the bed? When – on the nights they cried at the reality of being put outdoors – I wiped up the tears myself, and snuck them out to the nighttime diner where we would sit and talk and watch the sunrise? Or as adults, in the few months before goodbye, when they would go weeks without talking to me, when they would refuse to look at me when Booker or my kids were in the room, but who would still let me come over – on occasion – in the evenings, and stay until morning?

I wonder. I wait. By the playground, where we named one another.

It never began. It always was. Right from the moment we renamed each other. Ruby and Rose. The day itself has been re-told so many times that it no longer feels like a memory.

The story we tell others is too tidy. It never reveals that Rose was not my first choice of name. Something Ruby forgets. I wanted it to be something stupid, like Firetruck. I didn't like flowers; those were the things that decorated the gifts my family got me, the clothes they tried to force me into. But Ruby insisted. And I was fine with the names then, because it was a secret between the two of us.

In those early years, Ruby and I saw the world the same way because we discovered it at the same time. The fact that we shared the same shade of dark skin, meant that all the white ones we saw on TV in big houses were fiction, fantasy. Nothing more. The blood our mothers and sisters found in between their legs was witchcraft, voodoo magic. Nothing more. The names that the boys on the street corner who stuck cigarettes between the gaps in their teeth called out to passersby were funny, to giggle at as we walked to the park. Nothing to desire.

There were only the smallest, most childish trip-ups – suggestions of the end in the beginning. She always wanted to dress somewhat alike, in those early days, which was fine but it meant that she talked me into wearing whatever dress with her. But I went along with it, and the names, because I liked belonging wholly to someone, and knowing that someone was wholly mine.

Maybe that's why I let her continue to use that name even when, in high school, everyone else called us that. Worse was when they got me confused for Ruby. They would say Rose, and see a girl. But when Ruby called me Rose, it was someone seeing me before our bodies changed, before the boys on street corners started calling out to our asses, before the first kisses in the supply closets, before Ruby wanted that, all of that.

I do wish I could show Ruby who I've become. And I'm not stupid, I won't deny that she is home for me. Even if, after she married Booker, I made up excuses to see her less and less. It was because looking at her made me feel like I had been left alone. I never told her this. I shouldn't have had to. But then we'd have nights where she'd come over. "A break from the kids," she said. I'd laugh, because "kids" included Booker. And then we'd go on for the evening, laughing ourselves to sleep, half-drunk, on the couch.

I'm going home now. She gave me a time and a place. "The usual." Which, of course, is a test. Do we still speak the same language? Can the world still be the same to us both? "The usual" could've meant the playground where we first met, but that would mean that she still thinks of me the same, when I've become so much more. I'm driving to the diner we visited so often as teenagers. When – on nights where I couldn't sleep – we sat and laughed until sunrise or until they kicked us out. I'm headed there. Wait for me.



DO ZOMBIES DREAM OF ELECTRIC GUITAR?

M. Lawson | mlawson25@amherst.edu

Up here, on the podium, is our subject's soul-liver during the first stage of zombification. If you did the reading last night — and I know you did — you'll remember the infection of the brain is a Hollywood lie. It begins in the soul, inside the liver, and because it's a self-sustaining disease, it's easy to blame someone for their affliction. However, it is similar to the lycanthrope in that their minds are completely powerless to the actions of their souls and bodies; unlike the werewolf, though, there is never any reversion back for the zombie.

So — our example for this chapter is a fifteen year old boy, a Canadian who loves *The Office* and skateboarding. He's still pretty normal, but if you look at the ultrasound of the first-stage liver on your handout, you'll see it has a sheen that the sample liver doesn't. That's the film, known as the encasement. The best example I can give you is to imagine that thin plastic sheet which covers a microwave meal wrapped around an organ, squeezing it only slightly, barely moving. Look at the healthy liver printed right beside it. It's plump, while the other one is pressed and narrowed.

His soul is walking towards the end of his life, and why? Because he loves someone. Six someones, in fact, and he cycles through his loves every day. They all have some terribly irredeemable quality: one's got a boyfriend, one's got a girlfriend, one runs cross country, et cetera, et cetera. He does this, though, because his best friend recently got a girlfriend. Our subject has always done what his friend does, like skateboarding, but his envy is now treading into the worrisome. His friend, with his thousands of perceived accomplishments, has become an obsession, and stage one sets in.

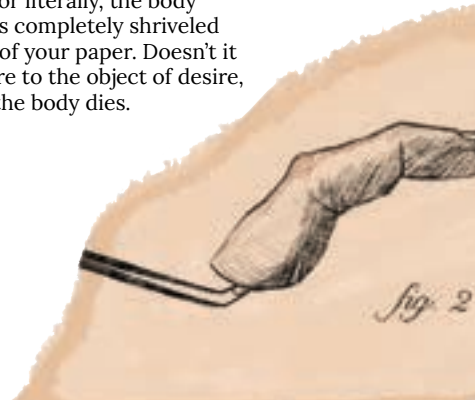
Stage two is when the zombification begins to be dangerous to the subject. Patients lose sleep, eat less, and try to take on the demeanor of the object of belovedness, to varying degrees of success. For example, you might see someone who's made themselves to become a complete twin of their obsession, but they look in the mirror and think it isn't enough and that they must go further. They might cut their hair or get identical tattoos, for instance. I read a case, the other day actually, where a woman stole a car just because it was the same red as her obsession's.

But, anyway, our subject doesn't care anymore about *The Office*. After all, his best friend doesn't like it. He prefers playing the guitar. Our subject reasons that he, too, should play the guitar. He spends all his money on one and wastes away watching Youtube videos to learn it. He dyes his hair red. He texts his friend at least ten times a day and imagines him with his girl-friend, while his partner-of-the-day rotates lazily in his mind. He reasons that they'll be equal again, once he does all this, but he still feels like he's losing to his friend. He is decomposing in a bin of his own envy, and no one notices. It's hard to tell, at that age, what's plain envy and what's an eventual diagnosis. That's why all of you who are interested in pediatric care should pay particular attention.

Come up here and touch his eye. This is from after he died, of course, once his body shut down, but the eye remains the same from after the third stage. It hardens while searching for the pulse of its desire and — no, you don't need a glove, you won't get sick — and it feels like a marble. When I touch my eye, it has a bit of give to it, but you can flick this one and it'll sound hollow. It is so vacant that no blood even needs to flow through it; it is entirely controlled by the soul. That's why there are no arteries visible.

Our test subject, now in the third stage, looks anemic, with no color behind his skin. He's ashen, like a vampire — no, not a real vampire, one of the movie ones. Edward Cullen. We'll get to that in a few weeks. At this point, the zombie decides he must take action, that he can't live without a resolution, so he tries to take the victim of his obsession. His best friend, for example, woke up with two less fingers on his right hand, with our test subject trying to gnaw a third one off and licking the blood off of his hands. He was even regaining some blush on his cheeks, that's how much of his friend he was eating. Remember — and you've got to write this down! — the friend cannot become zombified just because he was partially eaten. That's often the first question victims ask.

Oh — good question! No, the fingers cannot be digested, because the body's stopped functioning as human, which leads us into the final stage, so thank you. Once the soul stops feeding off of the obsession, either figuratively or literally, the body shuts down until death. The soul-liver is completely shriveled up. Look at the ultrasound on the back of your paper. Doesn't it look like a little raisin? Without exposure to the object of desire, it becomes dehydrated and eventually the body dies.



Our test subject spent his final days strapped down in a hospital room in Halifax while his limbs writhed around, and he was gagged so as to stop him from gnawing at the redhead nurse.

Without exposure to the victim, the soul-liver ceases in providing the body with a will to live. The body shuts down, part-by-part. In the subject's case, his legs went still first, followed by the head and torso, so that he stopped breathing. His arms, living for days on those last pulses of the soul-liver, crossed over him and kept twitching. Reportedly, his fingers kept strumming and his left hand kept fretting the neck of an unreal guitar before they stilled.

CHOICE

Gracie Rowland | growland25@amherst.edu

Georgiana and I tangled ourselves in each other's arms on the stairs to the loft. We were sitting in the only place we knew to sit whenever our Mama and Daddy fought. Mama was throwing things and cursing as usual, but this time Daddy was threatening to leave her. I wondered if he would leave tonight. I shuddered thinking about him walking to his Mustang in the rain, suit soaked as we said goodbye. My sticky fingers grabbed onto Georgiana's hand in a tight grip until my knuckles turned white from the strain. The air smelled like home, like cinnamon and brown sugar from the peach cobbler at dinner, but I was far away.

"Why do they hate each other so much?"

Georgiana whispered, "They don't hate each other. They just hate how the other one acts. They love us, and that's all that matters." I tried to accept what Georgiana was saying, tried to let the words pour over me. She had always been a shining idol for me, a guide on teachers, crushes, and trampoline tricks. Mama was all red rage and holes in the wall and Daddy was all fake smiles and distant dreams. But Georgiana? She walked in the door, and everyone shimmered in her presence, like a mirrorball. But somewhere inside I knew she was lying, that she wanted me to stop squeezing her hand so tight.

Mama had never loved Daddy, not for as long as I could remember. She loved her Bible and her white kitchen, and maybe she loved us. I couldn't always tell. Daddy, well, I knew Daddy loved his family. It was all he talked about besides his expensive suits. He told us every day that we were "Delta dolls" and that "with kindness anything is possible." But lately, I don't think he loves Mama, at least not like he used to. I think he realized that he couldn't save her. Sometimes I wondered why he ever fell in love with her in the first place. Mama wielded a cruelty I never fully understood. She wasn't vicious in the heat of the moment—she was vicious for fun. She'd hit us if we forgot to say ma'am or had what she called a "devilish look" on our faces. Sometimes she'd hit us for no reason at all. I sometimes feared it would spread to me, like wildfire. I didn't want to gain her virus of violence, her early morning slaps across the face and her affinity for words like "Jezebel" and "possessed." Someone told me that opposites attract. That's the only explanation I'll ever have for my parents' union.

“Why do you think Mama is so mean?” I asked Georgiana. I heard the cacophony of plates thrown against linoleum and words that can’t be unsaid. I became paranoid that Mama had heard my question, the one I’d been dying to ask for most of my young life. But I had to know what Georgiana thought. All I wanted was to love my mother.

Georgiana thought for a long time before looking at me. “All I know is that Mama is haunted by something. You’ve seen her wandering around the halls at night like a ghost. She never sleeps, never smiles. I think she’s holding fast to something.”

I started to cry quietly, scared that someday I too would become a ghost. What if I too disappeared into nights that never ended and voices only I could hear? What if I too traded reality for a realm of shadows and Biblical spirits? What if I too thought fury tasted sweet and love tasted sour? After all, Mama was half of me. What if Mama’s madness was inside me? What then?

Georgiana rubbed my back as I wept, moving her hand in circles and whispering how much she loved me. The screaming continued, but my hands stopped shaking and I began to slow down my crying. If I did turn into a ghost, I believed that Georgiana could make me human again, could make me love again with her loud laugh and constant eye roll, her bad puns and her hugs. Mama didn’t have anyone she truly loved. She was isolated from everyone and everything, trapped inside her own mind. She felt alone in the world, like an animal backed into a corner, I knew that.

My words tumbled over each other and my heartbeat quickened as I dared to dream. “Maybe Daddy will take us with him. There’d be no yelling and we could have ice cream for dinner! We could listen to our music loud in the mornings and he’d pack us treats for school.”

Georgiana looked scared at that moment to me, the first time I’d ever seen her look small. Her lower lip trembled and she fidgeted with her braids. “I hope so. I really really hope so.”

We went to bed late that night, staying up with a flashlight under our grandmother’s pink quilt. We spoke of what it would be like if Daddy moved us to New York City, or California, or anywhere outside of our small town. We spoke of the future with certainty, praying to Jesus together before we went to bed. We still believed that any God could be both all-powerful and all-good. We didn’t know that Daddy was to be killed in a car accident a year later. He got T-boned in his Mustang taking a right

at the only stoplight in town. We didn't know that we'd never talk to Mama again after we moved out. We didn't know a lot of things. But we were right about each other. We'd call every day, send annotated poetry books and chocolate boxes in the mail, and visit the other whenever we could. We'd learn that Mama's madness could be outrun, and Daddy's love could be embraced, that good and evil is a choice and not a condition.



Art by Amy Zheng '26

A TICK

Sydney Harris | sharris26@amherst.edu

Eyes snap open, gazing up at a white ceiling. You breathe in and out deeply. INHALE EXHALE INHALE EXHALE INHALE EXHALE. It came again - the dream. Made sure you *knew* it was still there even though it left you alone for a while. That tick. That stupid, pitiful, minuscule tick was there again. Crawling up your skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps as it looked for an opening to feed. Later, when washing your face - trying and failing horribly to push the thoughts away - you wish the day was done.

What could have happened?

What did it want to do?

Nothing serious happened, why do I feel this way?

Down the hill you go, a frown cemented on your face. *It thought you were pretty.* Passing your peers you don't acknowledge them. Your head's in a rut and your body stiff. Anger - a hatred lives within you. Deposited by that tick. It bit you and dug deep. Stole from you and left behind filth. It festered, eating you up. You hate that tick. *It's done nothing wrong, not really.* You want it to hurt. Not to die, but to feel pain. Want it to have dreams that then crowd its thoughts for an entire day. *They all do it, what did you expect?* A want for it to feel caged. To have its legs torn from the body one by one. To be stomped on, to be drowned down a filthy toilet, to be engulfed with flames, or to be choked by cigarette ash. Oh, and of course to have it overwhelmed with dread at any point in the day - so it looks around uneasily, questioning those around it, its friends, their intentions.

What a terrible person you are.

Then you feel disgusted. It's not right. To think

TO WISH

TO WANT

TO CRAVE

what you did. It's not right.

It's not right.

It's not right.

It's not right.

It's not you.

You're inside the classroom when the first thought weaves itself inside your mind. Right after the professor walks by and your fingers dig into your wrist while your body angles towards the exit. The second at the dining hall when your friend - an acquaintance really, who feels more caterpillar than tick - gives you an odd look. They note you looking elsewhere: the coming people, the one's in line, those leaving. *On the lookout.* Paranoid of one face. Of a body that tried to root itself in yours. Of a tick.

You know then you're not you. Instead of gazing at speaking friends you scan the area. *You're not respectful.* You don't smile at passersby or give compliments - try to make another's day just a little bit better. *You're not friendly.* In class, you've been forced to move and your posture isn't the same. *You're a rotting succulent on a windowsill, taking up as little space and attention as possible.* At night, as you lay in bed, you don't think of the good possibilities life has to offer. *Your curious mind was replaced with a depraved one.* You no longer feel the need for all A's, friends, comfort, balance. *You feel an intense need for some form of retribution - to get that tick and make it feel everything you do and more.*

What are you?

HOW TO FALL IN ROT

Grace Escoe | gescoe26@amherst.edu

I am not ashamed
That I have not known much intimacy
That I never had a hand that fit the curvature of my own
The I never had someone whisper my name
Like they owned it
In a way that sent hairs standing
And goosebumps on the back of my neck

Or at least I thought
You see I never knew their names until recently
I did not realize I got lost in them all along
That they are the ones who held my head in their laps
Who caught my tears
Even if they caused them
Who listened to my tiniest thoughts

Rapturous
I did not realize I had played Russian Roulette with depression
We skated across ice thin enough to see the current below
Shivers dancing across my shoulders
Danger leaning in
Their breath on the back of my neck
Almost exhilarating
As if you could feel the biting cold
At the thought of the tide

Our love was a circus
But I craved the adrenaline that came on the tightrope
They promised to catch me
But I knew all too well
Falling leads to something else completely

Even though the silver of sanity
Would send shocks of fear down my arms
The darkness seemed all too comforting

Soon I tired from running
From balancing on tightropes
From racing down ice before it cracked
From squeezing the trigger one more time
Find the darkness all too comforting

Overindulgence
All anxiety left me

Is a sore jaw
Too easy to resist
Something that always left me craving more
Left me grasping for just one more bite
Another bite that stretched
The bounds of pain

We would spend nights staring at the sky
Neither able to sleep
Anxiety was all too good at reminiscing
Memories like stars
Too many to count
Creating swirling constellations
A whirlpool

I got lost the pools of thoughts
Submerged by ideas
I drown
Deeper than you could ever imagined

Tantalizing
I fell all too quickly for panic attacks
The disillusionment I felt
Often took me days to come back from
As the things people named an attack
I found all too welcoming

It took the breath right out of me
Too stunned to speak at their appearance
It was as if my life depended on them

They welcomed me all too frequently
They were all-consuming
All I could think of was them
And when they left
It was as if I had fallen out of love

I spent my adolescence love lost in my own mind
Time cashed in on lonely memories
Because as with all infatuations
They faded

Things started to deteriorate all too quickly
My skin started to melt at the idea of them
I could not last

What I thought was intimacy
What I thought was love
All too quickly spelled out rot



Art by Caroline Wu '26

SPACE FOR DECAY

Sofia Ahmed Seid | sseid26@amherst.edu

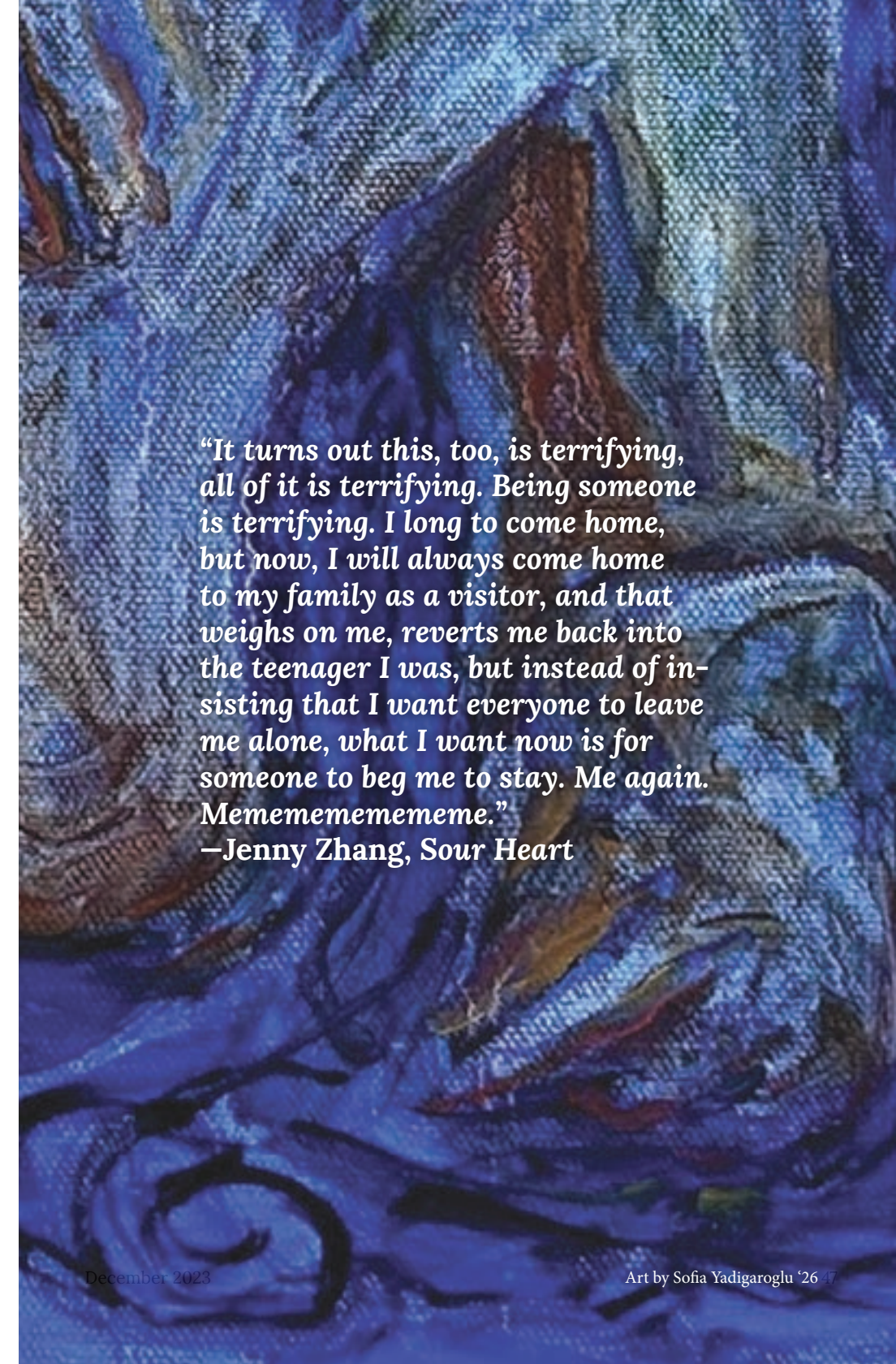
I forgot to eat, again.

I had to be called home, then dragged when I didn't comply, to eat something. I was too happy, too alive, how was I supposed to remember that I needed food when I was this content? My thoughts, feelings and actions were so seamless that there were only a few moments where I heard myself think. Memories, I didn't know it back then but I was making so many vivid memories, I was happy when I was sad, I was happy when I was angry, I was happy when I felt down. I was happy simply because I was alive. There was only one small taint that later became a big part of my life. Waking up to go to school. It wasn't so much having to rise early alone, but the entire idea of it that I found suffocating. Why was I being hauled in the unforgiving cold of the dawn to go somewhere I didn't want to be? This thought along with an abyss that seemed to swallow me whole would occupy my thoughts for just a fraction of a minute, but it was dreadful and I smiled less and less, I started to become aware of my thoughts. I remembered to feel hungry.

I was growing up, and by the age of eight, I had convinced myself that I had life figured out. I was practically an adult, I believed. I started building layers onto my persona. Sometimes, I reacted in ways that I didn't understand. Sometimes, I would feel jealous, but I couldn't realize what it was, only that it was an unpleasant, hopeless, rotten emotion. Most often I felt like no amount of explanation on my part was going to get me heard. But who am I, anyways? And why do I need to be heard? Am I another victim of life with whatever circumstances I was born in? Was I lucky to have been born into my circumstances? And why did everything have to be so fluid? Anchor, I looked for anchors everywhere around me. I looked for something real and everlasting without knowing what it was. In my desperate search, I found many pseudo-anchors, some lasted longer than others, but I always seemed to outgrow them faster than they had any hope of providing shelter. I was growing too fast. My tiny, designated space in the place I call home wasn't quite enough anymore, it was time to find a new space. My desire for room far outweighed my need for belonging, and so, here I am, an imprint of my eight year old self, more stranded than ever on my own volition.

When every day begins with my wake, I am aware but not really in control of my day, of my life, and ultimately, myself.

Fleetingly, on occasion, I feel the decay of my inner person and I have since cultivated a hatred for it. The rot, however, is not consuming, it only feels like it, which doesn't necessarily make things better. The rot is there to stay, but can I learn to give it its space so that it doesn't invade mine?



*“It turns out this, too, is terrifying,
all of it is terrifying. Being someone
is terrifying. I long to come home,
but now, I will always come home
to my family as a visitor, and that
weighs on me, reverts me back into
the teenager I was, but instead of in-
sisting that I want everyone to leave
me alone, what I want now is for
someone to beg me to stay. Me again.
Memememememe.”*

—Jenny Zhang, Sour Heart



Art by Erica Li '27

KINGDOM OF COMPOST

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Ella loved when you could hear the sound of corn husks at night. Some people wouldn't be able to distinguish it from the rustling of leaves on shivering trees. But not her — she knew the delicacy, the swift tumble that the loose husks made when they danced over dust. The night breeze lifting them like tumbleweeds into the inky air.

One side of her face was pressed into the pillow, but her eyes faced west out the window, toward the corn. From the other side of the bed, one would think she was sleeping as she always did, on her side, her hand tucked under her chin, her knees bent and legs curled into her torso.

Evidently, Maya did — think she was sleeping, that is. Ella heard the creak of her careful steps on the floor, before she felt Maya's warm breath whisper her name on the back of her neck. "Wake up," she whispered, shaking Ella's shoulders, "Wake up."

The sisters had no need to speak now. They both knew what they were going to do. Their plan had been crafted in hushed tones earlier that evening, as they set the table for dinner. When Ella turned, she saw the glint in Maya's dark eyes. She leapt to attention.

Their nightgowns, white linen, provided the only flashlights they needed besides the moon. The door was rough and heavy but it opened without so much as a groan. Their feet moved from worn wood to cool dust outside. Scattered below was the symphony of corn husks that Ella had been listening to through the window. The husks liked to do that — float off from their piles or paper bags after they'd been shucked, splay themselves on the ground and whistle in the air. Ella bent down to grasp one of the stubborn ones fighting the wind, clinging to the ground. She ran her fingers along the soft fibers within the fabric of the leaf, the threads of silk still attached. Clutching the husk in hand, she followed her sister's footsteps.

Maya knew the way magnetically. Through the field that molded under their feet, weaving around the mounds that showed where they had just planted garlic. Around a tree with a rope swing attached, the bench of the swing moving with the rest of the night symphony: crickets, and — from further away — the full-throated frogs.

The pile loomed ahead of them. A dark mass, shaggy, stagnant. As they crept closer, the silhouette became textured, a mosaic

of objects in the sea of soil. Ella's teeth joined her nightgown, the moon, in the glowing things. Her smile widened when she actually leaned forward and felt it — rich compost, matting under her nails. Her bare feet sank down as she reached her arm behind her for her sister to take it.

They slowly climbed, worms between their toes. With each step, steam seemed to rise. And below them, the plenty in all its stages: a pile of eggshells, still speckled as they lay in crumbs, from a bout of egg-salad-making the week before; a lone chicken bone poking from beneath deep brown apple skins; a crumpled piece of paper, Maya's math test; teabags still leaching caffeine; ribbons of carrot peels spiraling around each other; a half-cup of avocado that was now all one color—deep brown; shreds of cabbage melting into the dark soil; a whole squash with one white spot, rotting with blight, soggy with poisoned juice.

Each color and texture seeking to join the shingled heap, fudgy and long stewing, squelching underfoot as they aimed higher, higher still. Ella picked up one of the worms between her fingers and delicately raised it toward the sky, traversing the stars, before laying it down gently in the hollowed goblet of a mango peel. Their dirty hands intertwined, they sat down at the top, their nightgowns flush to the decomposers, turning toward each other and then out toward the night.

Echoing darkness, wisps of clouds moving into morning mist, the call of a lone night bird and the silence of the fields below, waiting, aching below the surface with millions of movements, yearning for the richness of this very pile.

Tomorrow, they would come back to siphon some off from the bottom: the thickest, richest, humus for the next plantings. But tonight they were at the top among the rawest peels, the hardest fibers, the most whole waste. They had traversed everything in between. They could see so many worlds from up here.

Ella set down her corn husk on top of the pile with glee.

FALLING AWAKE

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Waking up is like falling down a rollercoaster. In the crowded amusement park, this is what I tell my brother and mother and father. The sky is lined with the curling edge of sunset, warm oranges and yellows blending into the clouds. It makes the outlines of my family into something warm and soft.

My brother snorts at my statement and looks away.

I want to say something rasping, sharp. I instead say, *When you were younger, you had hypnic jerks that took over your limbs and caused you to convulse like a puppet jerking on a string. When you woke up, you would gasp that you were falling. You should know about falling while waking up.*

He mutters something about ridiculousness. I open my mouth again, but on the other side, my mother presses her hand on my shoulder. Her gentle outline is unfamiliar with the sharp grace of the growing shadows.

She says, *Stop dreaming, silly*, and she really means, *There's never time after you both left for college, but we are here together now. So stop.*

I shake off her hand and look away.

The amusement part is filled with things that are more metallic than bright: strips of LED lights flash across the steel winding structure of rollercoasters; the plastic sheen of the Ferris wheel cars that tip and shiver with the creaking machinery. Shoulders brush against our own with a ghostly presence—without any substance, but still there.

Our family stops by the row of stalls with carnival games. There are dangling stuffed animals filled with plastic beads, rows of bright orange basketballs and wiry hoops, the tinny sound of the announcer's voice—*Come right up! Win a prize for only a few dollars!*

My father ambles toward the prizes. He turns back to my brother and me, a wistful smile on his face. *Do you remember when we used to bring you both to amusement parks? I won that massive teddy bear for both of you.*

I say, *That was more than ten years ago. I was eight.*

My brother says, *I was six.*

He sticks his hands in his pockets and adds, *Also, you kept on missing the basketball shots. You said you spent 30 dollars on a cheap plastic stuffed animal, and I thought I wasted all your money and that was all of our money and we couldn't buy any food anymore, and my dad says, Oh, and laughs and shrugs.*

We end up walking past the carnival games and rollercoaster rides. We decide to ride the swing carousel, and when I am up in the air alone, I dangle my feet from the seat hundreds of feet in the air and pretend that I am flying. Below, the people are ants and I imagine destroying entire homes in one step.

At the end of the day, exhaustion swallows us when we return to the car. My family's breathing creates a living creature, rumbling and sucking in air. It is a comforting, lullaby-like sound, easy to fall asleep to, and that's what I do, my head tilted uncomfortably to the side.

I dream back to the time when my mother cut slivers from cardboard boxes—brown, sturdy little things—and place them into brother's shoes. That way, when the attendant passed by, my brother was just tall enough (*Not a centimeter over!* the attendant would exclaim) to ride the largest rollercoaster. *The gates!* someone would cry, *They're opening!* and in we rushed through, surrounded by the flickering trails of lights circling the ride. The plastic seats shone. *Help me up!* my brother would announce, and I would gently gather my brother's hands and hoist him up—*there you go!* I said, and he would beam so brightly that I told him he smiled just like the amusement park, glittering and silver-sweet. When the seatbelt came down, he didn't let go of my hand, and this was how we soared through the stars, our hands warm and sweaty, as we rose up, up, up! into the air and forever pressed by the skies' soft exhale.

But the dusky, shimmering sky is too large and beautiful for any sky that I know in real life, and this is when I realize that I am perhaps more like my father than I thought, a dreamer of the past. It is surprisingly less heartbreaking than I think it would be, to remember the present, perhaps because I know that the way I remember my brother—slight and cheeky and brilliant—was never how he truly was.

In the sparkling expanse of night sky, I turn to the dream version of my brother; I tell him—*it is okay. You don't have to stay.* He grins and glimmers sadly and says—*dreamers don't usually remember what they dream*—and I want to ask him what he

means, but we have climbed to the top of the ride, and I already know it is too late. The last thing I feel is his touch, his hand still clutching mine, and the rollercoaster/dream jerks/falls—

—and I *gasp*
awake.

When I wake up, it is dark. I am in the container of the car leaving the amusement park, and my cheek is pressed against the icy glass of the window. The sky is coldly bright and clear. Outside, the trees are already dressed in hints of magnificent golds and reds and oranges that swirl past branches and carpet the bare grounds, lit by moonlight puddling.

How was your nap? my brother next to me asks, offhandedly. His face is lit up quietly in the glow of his phone. I try to remember what I was dreaming about, and I only remember sweet stickiness lingering, like a piece of sugar candy long dissolved.

It was okay, I say, and he nods, not listening. Our conversation ends. In silence, we sit in the back of the car, and behind our reflections against our respective windows, the colorful leaves celebrate the arrival of another new season, another fall passing and awaking.

WEATHERED TO SAND

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I came to visit today.

Claire told me not to, that it would only hurt me more. But even if my therapist is normally my first opinion, this time I just can't agree. Why wouldn't I want to see him? And yet, my head spun as I walked down the tiled corridor. There was his door: with a shaking hand, I opened it.

Gentle morning light filtered into the room. He was sitting up in his bed, gazing serenely out the window when I entered. The sight of his hands, which I had never remembered being so wrinkled and frail, made my expression soften. As I did, he turned to look at me.

A mixture of confusion and realization on his face, his eyes both bright and dim at the same time. I held my breath, standing there, waiting, hoping. His face settled, finally, into a vague smile, and the corner of my ceramic heart was chipped away.

"Hello." A calm voice. A polite, impersonal greeting, like how he always addressed a waiter or waitress. I responded with the most tranquil smile I could muster.

"Hello. I'm here again. I brought some small things you might enjoy."

"Ah, these little things." He held up one of the snacks I placed on his table, packaged in plain plastic wrapping, his favorites. "I had these the other day and I quite enjoyed them, I believe. Do you remember what they're called?"

"They're kakimochi. I'm glad you like them."

I sat down next to his bed. The anticipation was always the worst part, the hardest part, seeing if he was the same as he always was. Now that I knew that he was, I could freeze the part of me that wanted to break down crying and push it away, to retreat into a side of me that could sit here unfeeling, to be able to converse with him as I would a friendly stranger.

Smiling, he unwrapped one of the kakimochi cookies and took a small bite, and then another and another. His enjoyment was clear on his face, and I couldn't help but wonder if this was really the highlight of his day. How was it to spend most of one's

hours alone in a room like this, with nothing but books and the view to pass the time? Could it really help? Was that why I was here: to help him? But what could I possibly do, other than pray that the sight of me triggers something in him? Am I just grasping at sand as it slips through my fingers?

Yes, that's all that I've been doing. Claire was right: it was a mistake for me to come here. Coming back here again and again is the same as watching a fruit slowly rot. Is that rotting fruit what I really want my final memory of him to be like? No, of course not. This was a mistake.

"Well, I just wanted to give you some of these snacks. I apologize for leaving so soon, but I have to go now. It was nice to see you again."

I stood up hastily, already unsure about my decision but resigned to stick to it, and after giving an awkward wave made my way towards the door.

"I'm sorry."

I stopped, surprised, and looked back at him. His eyes were slightly glazed over with a film of sadness.

"Something in the way you act makes me think I've wronged you somehow. And though I've been racking my brain over it, I simply can't figure out what it is; I just can't remember. But you seem like a nice young man, and I wanted you to know that if I did indeed wrong you somehow, I am sorry for it."

I blinked, unable to respond. He continued to gaze at me with that heartbreaking innocent expression, and I had to fight to keep my voice steady.

"Don't worry. You didn't do anything wrong," I told him.

His brow creased with worry, and he opened his mouth slowly to respond.

And suddenly then I was taken hold of, and there in my mind was him, the hollow husk of skin and flesh of my father's body, lying placidly in his bed amidst a horizon of dunes, and there, piling up onto his bed and then the desert underneath, dripping like an hourglass counting down inevitable time, were grains of bleak sand. I held him, desperately, showing things at him while looking for a sign of recognition in his eyes, yelling at him in desperation, and all the while he continued to smile listlessly

at the desolate landscape as the sand filled his bed, and as the sand began to pile up around his body, creeping up in height until it reached the mattress and then his delicate frame, I screamed. I grabbed his softened, fragile face and forced him to look at me, eyes to eyes, mind to mind, father to son. But his eyes were not there: there were only empty sockets now, sockets that sand had piled up in and now were pouring out of, grains of ugly crystallizations of what were once beautiful orbs of glass, shining with memories. That dusty speck was when he had taken me out to my favorite diner for my birthday; that gray particle was when he showed me some of his vinyls, and we laughed together at how I liked them too; and now they were scattered, blown away by the cold wind, and I could never hold or share them again. I stared up at him desperately, reason having been torn from my throat, but when I looked up, there was no man anymore, only a new peak in the desert dunes. That kind face looking back at me was already unrecognizable.

“Goodbye,” I said quietly, and shut the door behind me, before he could be further hurt and perplexed by the tears forming in my eyes.



Art by Samuel Nklenga '26



Art by Samuel Nklenga '26



Art by Erxi Lu '24

PARALYZED POLE

Eliza Becker | ebecker26@amherst.edu

Korris winced at the scissors' first zip. Her ear had never been nicked while having her hair cut professionally, but she felt it to be probable, inevitable, even, given their gangling presence under her temples.

Over the last few years of her mid-twenties, she had finally built up a level of trust in Myko, her barber. Trust in him not to make her hair necessarily look *pretty* on her head and face—no. Confidence that he would not carve the ear out of her head.

But last July when she rode the bus twenty-seven blocks to her usual barber shop, she found its windows boarded up, the candy cane of a barber pole no longer spinning. But plain. Paralyzed. Nothing special about red swirls sitting still. The illusion that they would forever be propelled upwards, produced infinitely from under, was gone.

It was January, now. Since then, Korris had been, to no avail, attempting to acquire Myko's replacement—if even possible. The man was so gentle with the blade. Men were rarely gentle with anything.

"You need to stop flinching each time I cut the hair," said Strossen, a possible prospect. Strossen was doing a so-so job. He had a Russian accent which reminded Korris of her first grade teacher, Mrs. Greyf. The way his tongue drawled into the "L." "Fuhllinching."

"Sorry. I'm just sensitive of my ears, Strossen," her voice rasped out of her throat. Too many cigarettes this morning. "I noticed. They are very big. I understand."

Korris couldn't really make out his ears under his mane of salt speckled black bush, but she practiced some deep breathing, thought of Mrs. Greyf and her earnestness, and decided to believe him.

"You say my name very often," Strossen moved his scissors to the back of her head now, and she could breathe regularly once more.

"I think it's nice to hear your name be said. Not everyone has people close to them to say it all the time."

“Ok, girl!”

“Korris.”

“Okay, Korris.”

Korris smiled up at him through the mirror, but as she did so, she saw the scissors hovering over her ear. The smile dropped off her face. Her butt squeaked against the faux-leather chair. Strossen moved the scissors away quickly, and Korris made out a creasing in his beard, where his mouth should have been.

“My daughter likes boy hair like you. Louissa.”

“Do you cut Louissa’s hair?”

“I used to, but now she lives far away. I taught her to cut it herself.”

“I wish I could do that.”

“I would teach you, but that would not be smart business strategies.”

Korris nodded in agreement, “I understand.”

Once the haircut was complete, the two thanked each other, verbalizing the other’s name.

As the glass door slunk into its frame behind Korris, she felt her phone tremble against her rib. She removed the phone from the pocket, and saw the name “Karinna” slide on and off the screen. She bit off her glove, exposing her fingers to the white frigidity of winter, her least favorite season, and swiped into “accept.”

“Korris?” A sharp voice shot through the speaker, into her ear. She moved the phone an inch away, but didn’t flinch.

“Yes.”

“How have you spent your Sunday evening?”

“Getting a haircut.”

“Kory, you don’t need to do that. You don’t need a new barber. Just let me cut it like when you were young. I’ll send you a ticket—the train is only two hours. You never come see me,” the sharpness turned soft.

“I do need a new barber, and it’s Korris to you.”

“Who are you to tell your own mother what to call you? I decided what to call you when you erupted from within me,” and that easily, the sharpness had returned.

Korris didn’t say anything. Kory was not something someone who had spoiled her could call her. It was a nickname reserved for someone alive and well in her mind. Not someone rotting her from within. The mere memory.

“You better not be smoking a cigarette right now. Those will kill you. I bet your lungs are so black. Like the holes in your ears.”

Korris didn’t respond, but slid the phone back into her jacket pocket, pulled her glove onto her dry, ashy hand, lit a cigarette, and walked.

She balled herself up on top of the bus stop bench, and could feel the metal draining all of the heat from within her, starting at her ass. As she waited, she opened her Notes app to a mostly crossed out list of prospective barbershop replacements.

This shop had been the last one on the list, the last one within a forty-five minute radius of her studio apartment. Strossen had successfully avoided touching her ears for the entirety of the haircut, which showed potential. However, his large stature, reminiscent of her former partner, uneased her. With her mother, Korris at least knew everything her body hid within itself—knew of its core.

“You should wear a hat out here, girl!”

Korris moved her entire ball of body leftwards and back to look up at the behemoth of a man that was Strossen.

“Korris,” he corrected himself before she could respond. “With all your ears.”

“Strossen! You’re done at the shop?”

Strossen nodded. “I tell Louissa she needs to wear a hat. It’s colder where she lives.”

“Does she?”

“She says sometimes. I don’t know.” Strossen’s eyes stared out at the deserted street, wide and gray, absent of people and cars. “It is hard being away from her.”

Korris stared out, too. "It's her decision in the end, I guess."

Strossen nodded. The two shivered in silence for a moment. "I have an extra hat in my coat. If you want it," Strossen said.

"You just carry around an extra hat?"

"Yes. Do you want it or no?"

Korris smiled, said "yes," and donned the orange beanie Strossen handed to her, warming her formerly numb ears.

"Okay. Goodbye Korris."

"You're not taking the bus?"

"No. I walk home. This stop is on my way."

"Oh. So you don't want the hat back?"

"No. You need ear protection. Or you can bring it back for your next haircut," Strossen winked, and turned towards the corner of the street.

There were still no cars, but he waited for the light anyways, and made his way across the street, a big warm mass taking his time through the cold. Korris pulled the hat tighter on her head, and on her phone found the emailed train ticket from her mother.

By the time she looked up, a bus barreling into the stop had obscured Strossen from her view. As she boarded the bus, swiping her card, she rushed to the far window, hoping for a glimpse of the man who had provided her such warmth in the cold. But as she craned her neck over an old woman, the frosted window revealed nothing but the same dull desolate street that had always been there.

VOIDED

Anonymous

As a kid, I used to lock myself in the bathroom and try to imagine what death was like.

In the middle of the night, I would tiptoe out of bed, careful not to step on the floorboards that creaked, careful not to wake anyone up. For what felt like hours, I would sit on the cold, hard floor of the bathtub, motionless. Hugging my knees to my chest and burying my head in my knees, I would try to make myself as small as possible. I would try to make my facial expressions as blank as I could, stay as still as I could, and slow my breathing or hold my breath in entirely.

With the lights turned off and the curtains pulled closed, a sea of darkness would consume the room. I would close my eyes and just lose myself in the black.

I thought the blackness was death, that dying is existing in an infinite void of black. You can't move, you can't talk, you can't hear anything, but I thought you would see black.

What does my mom see deep down in her grave? What's she experiencing, what's she feeling? Because I don't think it's nothing, whatever "nothing" may mean. I doubt what she's experiencing now is the void of black that I imagined when I was 5, but I still think death is something, even if it's a different kind of something. Death is still a type of existence.

Why else would we pour gallons of water over her grave every time we visit? It's not a symbol of our love like fresh-cut roses are, nor a sign of our respect like the engraved marble is. It's not really done for our benefit, so it must be done for hers. So she must be existing somewhere in order to feel this cold water.

But do you think she really notices it? Do you think she feels cleaner, purer, better after we've washed her grave? And do you think she's noticed that we haven't visited in years? Has the mess and dirt been accumulating in whatever space she's in now?

Do you think she misses us?

She hasn't felt the presence of her kids by her graveside, hasn't heard our voices or seen our faces, in years. She doesn't know where I am now, what I'm doing, or the type of person I've become. I wonder if she can even tell I'm still alive.

Where is she right now? I just want to know where she is. I just want to know how she's doing. I just want to know if she's okay. Is her grave big enough? Or is the earth gripping her so tight that her ribs overlap, that her eyes bulge out of her head? How much of her head is left? How much of her face? Because most likely, the worms and insects have gotten to her already, have made their home within her already. They've kept her better company than I have. Most likely, all that's left are tattered strips of flesh clinging stubbornly to the bone. Half-rotten sinew and muscle. Dried-out, blackened eyes.

And we left her there, to rot like that, alone. There's no one by her side. No one to stand beside her and talk her through it. No one to tell her to push and fight, because it'll all be okay. No one to tell her she's loved and remembered. No one by her side.

I'm not even with her in spirit. I don't even think about her on her birthday. I don't even know when her birthday is. What did she even used to wish for when she blew out her candles?

One time I read her journal entry from a month before she died. She wrote that she was exhausted, that it hurt her to stay alive, that it hurt her to be a burden. It hurt to see us lose sleep as we listened for her breaths beside her bed. It hurt to see my dad scrambling, trying to pay for her treatments, to walk in on him silently weeping at the dinner table. It hurt that she was too weak to stand up and give me a hug, that she couldn't even hold her own daughter as I cried.

It hurt to see what her life had become. She couldn't believe what her life had become.

And she wrote that she wanted to get better. She wanted to get better so that we could all just have a vacation, so that we could all, as a family, just go to the beach. She just wanted to go to the beach.

I'm sorry you never got to go. I'm sorry you never got your wish. I'm sorry I forgot to visit your grave. I'm sorry I remembered I should, but then didn't. I'm sorry that I don't remember you, that I don't miss you. Because how can I miss you when I only know your face from pictures, when I only know your voice from videos, when I only know your love logically? I was just so young. And now, my memory of you has rotten.

Maybe soon, I'll visit your grave. I'll bring gallons of the cleanest water I can find. Gallons of every brand of water in case you have a favorite, in case one cleans you better than another.

When I die, I hope someone visits my grave. Even if they don't clean it, even if they don't talk to me or know me. Even if I can't

feel it anyway. I just would want someone to think about me every now and then. I'd like to think I did enough to deserve that. I'm sure my mom did more than enough to deserve that, but still we've left her alone.

Even now, she's still there alone.

Even after all this, I probably won't go visit her. And I don't have a good explanation for why.



Art by Cecelia Amory '24

HAUNTED

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She bit her lip. What she was about to do was a felony, or at the very least, a crime. But she simply had to do it. All these years had been leading up to this point, and tonight was the night that it was *going* to happen. No question about it.

The house had stood on the corner for as long as anyone could remember. Built in 1840, it was a two story colonial style house. What white paint that was still visible was chipped and mottled with the years of abandonment. Adding to the sense of dilapidation were the rotting wooden planks boarded across each of the lower windows, creating the effect of a blindfolded monster.

Movement. She blinked. *Nothing.* For a moment, she thought she had spied something moving through one of the unobstructed windows on the top floor. She shivered.

It was a mid-autumn night. All throughout the day, foreboding gray clouds had obscured the sun and sky. These clouds had clung to their location for a week now, occasionally watering the earth with their effluent, which the dry earth had thirstily drunk until a cloying dampness covered everything. This only stood to make the cold all the more oppressive, cutting through to the bone.

No car had passed by the house in nearly an hour. Steeling herself, the woman crossed the street. Still, she couldn't help but hesitate before stepping off of the sidewalk into the overgrown lawn.

The dampness clinging to the long, dead grass easily soaked through the fabric of her clothing, only serving to add to the discomfort. The grass blades parted easily enough as if the very grounds were accepting her trespass. Within the space of moments, she was in the backyard.

The trespasser frowned. She didn't recall passing through the gate. Turning, she saw that the gate was closed. *How had that happened?*

Before she could fully realize, her hand was on the doorknob to the back entrance. It was too late to abandon her task. These bizarre gaps must just be her anxiety. She exhaled, trying to regain control of her own mind.

A mudroom. The door opened without so much as a complaint, and she was greeted with garden tools, a shoe rack holding three pairs of boots: a man's, a woman's, and a child's, each caked in mud from a lifetime long since passed.

Igniting the blinding beam of her flashlight, the woman stepped through the next door, this one leading to the foyer. The ceiling sagged under the weight of the years, culminating in a grotesque bulge where presumably a pocket of water had collected. The bannister had fallen inward into the stairwell and now hung limp, inverted from its original intended position.

She ignored the lower floors and turned her attention to the stairs; for the first time the house complained at her presence, each step loudly groaning under their burden. She knew that the house wanted her here but not upstairs. The house desperately wanted to keep those secrets hidden.

On the landing were three walls, a door set into each one. The woman stared at the rightmost door. She was rooted to the spot. Something within her wouldn't take her feet any closer to the darkened entrance.

The spell was broken as she turned and approached the door opposite. This one opened easily. As the door swung open, the earthy scent of decay assaulted her senses and her head spun.

A man stood at the window.

A gust of wind from nowhere.

She shut her eyes.

He was gone.

Any sense of clarity she had maintained up to this point was long gone. The world spun about her, and she swayed. Stumbling forward, she tried to find the familiar shape of that man. A crunch from beneath her feet as she stepped on abandoned needles.

She recoiled in terror. Something was wrong. An empty bed frame occupied the center of the room, the windows showed no light from the street, and the floor was littered with discarded needles.

The intruder vomited on the floor and rushed out of the room. Slamming the door behind her, she braced her shoulder against it as the tears began to flow. She shuddered with the sobs and felt her knees give out beneath her. Sliding down the door to that accursed room, she fought to keep her breath.

Then came the whisper. "*Come home.*"

She blanched. The voice was all too familiar, but somehow... wrong. The woman fought to regain her feet. Holding onto the wall for stability, she stumbled to the center door, now inexplicably open. Whispers came from everywhere as she crossed the insurmountable distance of a few feet.

The room was well lit, white lace curtains blew gently in the summer breeze, and the smell of dandelions and freshly cut grass wafted in from the open windows as sunbeams illuminated the woman seated at the vanity. She smiled.

The illusion vanished when the trespasser kicked a discarded glass bottle. The room now stood as it truly was, bearing the abuse of 20 long years of abandonment. The wallpaper was peeling off of the walls, revealing black mold which grew unhindered from beneath the veneer. The room itself had been abandoned in place, everything from before was present, but decayed.

After an indefinite amount of time, the woman nodded. No longer was she in control of herself. She smiled as she returned to the landing, joining her mother and father, now dressed in their Sunday best.

"It's time for bed," her mother cooed. The woman nodded dumbly, and the family passed into her bedroom.

I WANNA SHOW YOU SOMEONE

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Their father threw a faded quilt in the middle seat where Ulysses would sit. Ulysses developed the habit of wetting himself when he felt the slightest urge to go. Their father assumed the habit would just up and disappear sometime soon because Ulysses had been wetting himself less frequently. Today, he and Emile had to pick Ulysses up from school. The ride was long, and their father figured the quilt was better safe than sorry.

Age had worn the quilt rough, and Emile pushed it from rubbing its bristles on his leg. He hated its texture, and it rubbed his thigh raw on long car rides.

“Don’t move it! His piss will get on you if you move it.”

“I’ll move it when he gets in.”

Their father thrashed his arm into the quilt, pushing it against Emile’s leg. Emile pushed it back with another thrashing arm, bunching the quilt against his father’s thigh. Their father pushed the quilt, and so did Emile, and they pushed it back and forth and back and forth until Emile gave in.

“He’s gonna piss on your seat if you leave it bunched against my leg.”

Their father ignored Emile. Emile pushed the quilt back to its original spot, scooting it just a bit so the bristles didn’t touch his leg. Their father drove on with eyes stuck to the road, silence.

There never was silence in the trees. She sang and she sang and her feathers brushed the browning leaves. They came back green, more life than they’d ever had. She stopped her singing to listen, but she found he hadn’t arrived just yet.

Ulysses walked out of his school’s entrance, holding hands with his teacher, Ms. Ashworth, who carried his backpack and lunchbox. Ulysses’ hand was wrapped loosely in plastic wrap and some light, white bandage. Their father and Emile were still set in the blue Chevrolet.

“What’s he got on his hands?”

“They probably noticed that burn.”

Ms. Ashworth approached their car, signaling to roll the window down to speak.

“Hello, Mr. Gonzalez. I just wanted to walk to help Ollie carry his things. He complained about his hand during class earlier today.”

“Well, I am sure he is fine. How about you get in the truck, Ulysses.”

Ulysses stood there, impervious to the entire interaction. Picking at the bandage around his wrist, he giggled at how the bandage tore and split beneath the pressure of his fingernail.

Emile exited the truck and took Ulysses’ things from Ms. Ashworth. He smiled briefly and hoped she would not ask him any questions.

“It’s good to see you, Emile. I hope you have been well since graduating.”

Their father interjected as Emile opened his mouth, “He’s been well. Once he gets on working, he’ll be useful.”

“Things have been good,” Emile said to quell the silence that followed his father’s joke.

Ms. Ashworth smiled and walked away. Ulysses, still picking at the bandage, had settled on the quilt by the time Emile packed his brother’s bags into the floorboard.

“We’ve got to stop by Walmart on the way home. I’ve gotta pick something up for tomorrow.”

Emile nodded to agree and laid his head back to try and fall asleep. Ulysses prodded at his brother’s shoulder to tell him something.

“Bubba, I can fix this,” Ulysses said, touching the exposed burn.

“Quit pickin at it, Ollie. We’ll put a new bandage on when we get back home, just quit pickin at it.”

“Bubba, I can fix this.”

The blue Chevrolet rolled into the parking lot from a crowded boulevard and found a spot to park underneath a large oak. The oak was full of birds, and their father moved parking spots. He hated getting bird shit on the truck.

She heard him somewhere. She knew they had to see each other today. He was hurt. It was not time to call for him.

Emile woke up in a sweat, sitting in the truck under the mid-afternoon sun. Drowsy-eyed, he caught sight of Ulysses and their father heading into the store. He got out of the truck, locked the door, and caught back up to the pair now entering the store.

Ulysses was pacing behind his father, trying to keep up with his long stride.

“Daddy, why’d you move from under that tree?”

“Too many birds.”

“But that’s where I saw her! In that tree!”

“Saw who?”

“Where I saw her! She told me about her feathers, how they had magic in them.”

“Ulysses, who are you talking about?”

“She had these blue feathers. And she sang so pretty I didn’t want her to stop.”

“Well, if you see her again, you get me. Got it?”

Emile felt nauseous after waking up and told their father he was going to the bathroom. He was always nervous to leave Ulysses with his dad because his dad often walked too fast for Ulysses to keep up. Emile nudged Ulysses before heading to the bathroom, and their father kept walking.

“Ollie, stay by Daddy, okay?”

“Okay, Bubba. I wanna tell you about someone when you get back.”

Emile left Ulysses for the bathroom. He figured Ulysses would catch up to their father as he was always too scared to stray off.

The open entrance let in a sound he’d heard before. Ulysses followed that voice. The voice was pretty and was singing and he didn’t want it to stop. She told him to come to the tree where all the birds were. She sat high and proud with her family. She spread her wings. The tips stretched the width of the oak’s shady

crown. Falling feathers shimmered and danced to the whimsy of the wind, slipping through the air as silk. Ulysses asked to take and he did just that.

Emile hurried to the bathroom and tried to finish as quick as he could. He finished and went to the aisle he thought Ulysses and their father headed to. He found their father holding a hose, Ulysses not by his side.

“Where’s Ollie?”

“He wasn’t with you?”

“I told him to catch up with you!”

The pair ran to the entrance where Emile left Ulysses. Emile saw the white bandage strewn across the floor near the entrance—no other trace of Ulysses.

“So you just let him leave? I figured he was going to the bathroom with you.”

“Maybe if you paid attention to him for a second, you’d see he wasn’t with you.”

“Boy, don’t talk to me like that, he can just run off. You should’ve known better than to leave him without watching him catch up to me.”

“You should’ve left us at home. You should’ve fucked off and come by yourself if you didn’t want to pay attention to him.”

Their father snatched Emile by the wrist, snatching all of Emile. He gripped him violently with eyes ablaze. Their father did not care if they were in public; he had been wanting to shut Emile up all day.

Ulysses approached the two who were causing a scene near the entrance. Their father, who towered over Emile, clutched him by the wrist and cocked high an open palm. Emile attempted to resist his father’s grip but was frozen, restrained by a brutish hand. Emile’s winced face turned in anticipation of the hand poised to rain down.

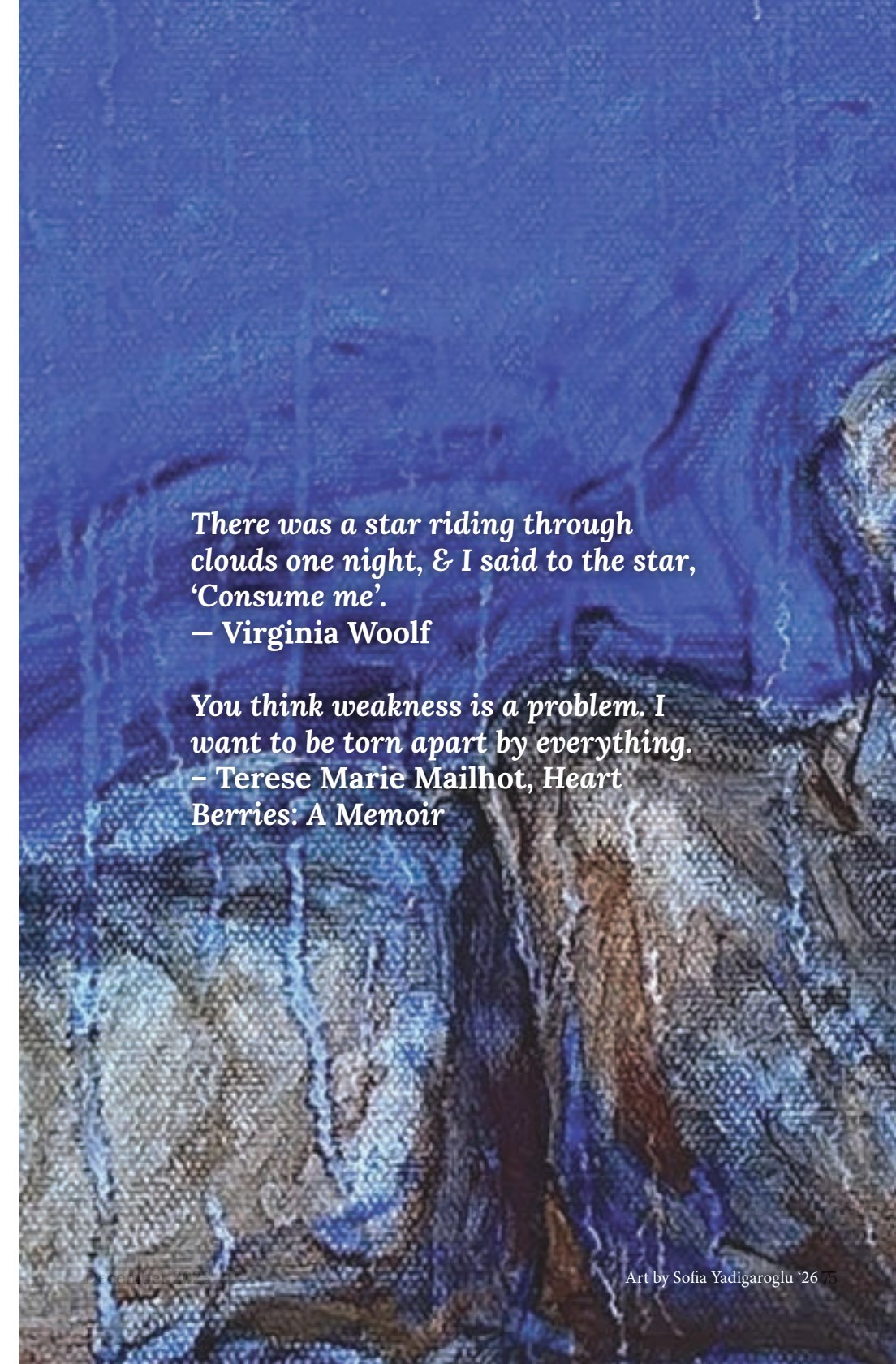
Ulysses plucked his brother’s spare thumb from the unmanacled arm. Their father’s grip broke, and hands slid from Emile’s wrist as their father’s grip fell limp without power.

“Ulysses, where have you been!?”

“Are you okay, Ollie?”

Healed fingers gripped a blue feather. Twiddling its quill with twinkling, iridescent bards. Its sparkle was ethereal, Emile motionless by the way it scintillated.

“Bubba, I wanna show you someone.”



*There was a star riding through
clouds one night, & I said to the star,
'Consume me'.*

– Virginia Woolf

*You think weakness is a problem. I
want to be torn apart by everything.*

– Terese Marie Mailhot, *Heart
Berries: A Memoir*



Art by Tiiia McKinney '25

THIS PLACE AND THE OTHER

Madi Suh | msuh26@amherst.edu

It was on the corner of Wilder on the way to the 7-Eleven
that you first stopped me in my tracks, and I didn't notice
the car that would have killed me zipping past until after
you grabbed my arm, my ankle rolled and I fell
for the first time, beginning an endless cycle
of falling and picking myself
back up again.

Who it is that spins
the gyre, riding the Zipper at the carnival fair,
splattering lights everywhere, your smile upside
down, your voice loud and then turning
around, saying that you *loved* me,
you loved me.

And when we came back
to Earth you bought a pint
of vanilla ice cream and I told you
to get another and we ate half of it outside
the chapel where I once thought we
might get married someday and you kissed me
and saved the other half for another day and forgot
about it and it melted away.

Was that the same night we trekked up Rocky Hill in the rain?
The night the stars went to hide and you
told me to close my eyes and to dream not of this place
but the other, the one where we said someday, we would have
our own dog too, perhaps a cat, heck, make it a whole zoo,
of animals we could never take care of.
You had a lifelong dream in which you held me in every
shirt that I ever owned, I had a drawer full of someday, someday
we would get the hell out of this paradise called
home, oh someday once meant that
I would wear these sweaters and you would wear
those jeans and I would forgive the things you swear you didn't
mean but tell me, was that the night you cradled
my head and its dreams in your lap and asked me if
I could see the stars and I said yes,
yes I can -

But perhaps what I really mean to ask is do you remember
if it was my left ankle I rolled or the other, were the lights
black and white or in color, was it that night
or the other, the one where your smile was
crooked and your eyes wanted something

mine didn't, the night you didn't take me home
the way you said you would, where you twisted
my arm and watched me fall, you told me to close my eyes
and I
let it happen, and was it vanilla I tasted on my lips or
some flavor of fucked up

Help me –
I can't remember
if it was raining or if
I cried, if there ever really were stars
in my eyes.

Tonight I will keep my eyes open
to delay the dream in which you love me
to see this place for what it is:
When I walk down Wilder and see the cars zip by
I dream not of this universe but
the other,
where the car hits and I fall and my neck snaps clean in two,
this death and another,
this life and each other,
god, what
separates, this place
and the other.

PRISONER'S DILEMMA

Annika Bajaj | abajaj25@amherst.edu

"I think I might be in love with you." Y leans against the cell wall with hands behind his head, foot tapping against the cell wall. (The other cell wall; the cell was very small.) He speaks the words harshly, almost violent in the sounds of the consonants.

"Love is a strong word, don't you think?" This sentence under his breath in a delicate tone, pitched up for contrast. "Strong? Not strong enough." The harsh voice again.

Y opens his mouth but is interrupted by an echo from down the hall. "Strong? Not strong enough! Oh darling! I love you so loudly!" The echo chuckles. "You don't think it's a bit over the top? This is why I'm fed up with playwrights. It's just not that deep."

Y thumps his fist once against the third cell wall (it really was a very small cell) and snaps back, "Not that deep? You write poetry and you think you know when something's over the top?"

Y calls the echo X. Y hasn't bothered to ask the real name of the echo, since he feels it's appropriate to attach namelessness to facelessness, mystery on top of mystery. Or perhaps he just prefers that the bruises to his artists' ego by this flippant critic stay a little less personal. The guards, unfortunately, don't protect him against emotional injury.

Anyway — speaking of guards. The tallest of the bunch, whom Y has affectionately dubbed Goodcop, approaches the front of his cell. "Special visitor for you two today."

"Us two? Me and the rat?" Y points to the dead rat in the corner of the cell that's been slowly decomposing for the past month. Goodcop laughs out loud but somehow maintains a straight face — a magical feat that Y hopes to remember for when he's out and gets to direct plays again, instead of just writing them in his head.

"You and the liberal arts college student," Goodcop clarifies, jerking his thumb over at X. "Some weird popular psychology experiment for TV."

Y bristles at the thought. "Seriously? I have better things to do with my time." Goodcop quirks an eyebrow in disbelief, but Y insists, "You're interrupting my creative process." (X snorts from the next cell.) "Can't it wait until next week?"

Goodcop adds, “You’ll get paid.” The creative process, it turns out, can be paused.

Goodcop moves aside to reveal a comically nerdy-looking woman in a pristine lab coat, peering over thick-rimmed glasses at a clipboard. She appears to be unaffected by Y’s disheveled appearance or his evident unwillingness to participate. Over the corner of their shoulder Y can see a person holding a camera – it appears their TV appearance began before they even had a choice.

The woman enunciates each letter of her spiel. “Let us begin. The story is simple. You must choose which one of you will die tonight. The choice must be agreed upon by the both of you. If you refuse to choose, you will both die tonight. Whoever survives will be released, and their record cleared. You have one hour to decide.” The camera light clicks off, and the woman shakes her head as if to shake off her TV persona.

“We’ll be needing your signatures for permission to film the execution,” she says, casual and unconcerned. “But we’ll be back for those later.” The Science Woman leaves a thick silence behind her as she exits the cell block.

Goodcop can’t quite look Y in the eye. He follows Science Woman out with barely a nod of farewell.

Y’s heart doesn’t skip a beat, and nothing flashes before his eyes, except for the resident cell fly. Y doesn’t consider the meaning of life, of where he might end up when he dies, whether it happens to be now or in forty or fifty years. Y continues to breathe.

X, on the other hand, is freaking the fuck out. Over hyperventilating breaths, Y hears them say, “What the fuck? I’m nineteen years old, I’m not supposed to make life-or-death decisions until at least twenty-one, or something? I’m not gonna fucking choose whether you live instead of me, I don’t even know what I’m doing next week, I’m not playing fucking God today— is this even ethical? Fuck whichever IRB that approved this fucking experiment!”

Y tries to bite back a laugh but it escapes in one loud, “ha!” that rings through the cell block. “Awful lot of ‘fucks’ over there for potential last words... not very poetic, is it?”

X audibly balks at his words. “Do you not even care about this? You don’t understand the weight of this thing they’re making us do? How are we even supposed to choose?”

Y counts the bugs on the ceiling. 1, 2. (The cell is, again, quite small.) “Isn’t it easy? You’re young, you’re in college, you’re creating art and honing your craft, you’re learning who you are, you’re making friends. I’m some thirty-year-old wannabe thespian.”

X is quiet for an empty minute. Then, tentatively, as if they’re touching a glass vase balanced at the edge of a cliff: “But... don’t you have something to live for?”

Y quiets too. “I mean, yes. But not like you do.”

The quiet holds them for a moment longer. But X, as Y knows, can’t stay silent for long – too much time alone with their own thoughts – so Y breaks it with, “Would you do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Write me down. In your poetry. From all your criticism of my writing I can tell you’ve got a talent, a passion. I’d like to be remembered by you.”

“I don’t –” X hesitates, although Y feels that the answer should be obvious – he’s practically doing them a favor! Inspiring material is so hard to come by sometimes.

“I just don’t want... I guess... alright. Tell me about your life, then.”

Y can’t remember the last time someone has asked him about his life beyond a how are you/Fine, you?/Good to see you! It’s been a while since he’s talked to a real friend. He tells X this, and tells them also that he’s finally reached out to friends from high school and college, from before he dropped out. People who went into music, disappointed their parents just like him, as well as those insane chemistry majors who stuck with it to grad school. The friendships are hesitant, just as they always are at the beginning, but Y finally feels lonely in a way that grows flowers from dirt, instead of the kind of lonely that congeals and clogs arteries and paralyzes limbs. He’s felt that kind of lonely too. He writes it into his plays – he tells X, “Always write your feelings down. They might be too strong in the moment you feel them, but someday you’ll look back and a full-length novel will be laid out in your journal.” He likes to give this kind of generic advice, where the person can’t really say why or whether he’s right and so is impossible to argue with – but he likes to think it’s good advice regardless.

Y tells X, if you ever find yourself failing to find yourself, work as a janitor in the venue of whatever art you’d like to do – a

theater, for instance. Paid inspiration! Y tells X, if it doesn't work the first time, ask your mom for some leftover homemade meals portioned into Tupperware (also for inspiration) and then try again. Y tells X, keep an open mind, you can change what it means to become who you want to be. X listens and Y imagines them nodding, taking mental notes. If he's gonna die, at least he'll live on in this younger generation, in these world-saving teenagers.

"So I've been writing plays the past year, still working in the theater, trying to get some traction in the art world. Felt like an abject failure for a good chunk of my twenties. Well, all of my twenties. But I feel like I'm getting somewhere now. Or, was," Y adds, as an afterthought.

X sighs in a way too world-weary for their years. "That doesn't sound very jaded to me." Y opens his mouth to reply but X, characteristically, interrupts to say –

"I think it should be me."

"Absolutely the fuck not!" Y guffaws. "The whole point of this was to capture my essence in your mind so that some part of me lives on! Or some poetic bull like that. My throat is dry from all that talking. Don't waste it."

X sighs again. "You don't get it. I'm just... so tired." Sigh number three. "I don't wanna have to write down my feelings anymore. I'm tired of feeling."

Y contemplates answering with a comforting word, but it's like all the air has been sucked out of the room in preparation for the magnum opus of exhales, like X plans to breathe out the content of their lungs, stomach and veins all at once.

"First they say you have to know what you want when you're eighteen. Then they say you have to discover all of your passions and pursue all of them all the time, and also make lots of friends and be close with all of them somehow, and also save the world, and also take care of your mental health, and also exercise five times a week. And I can barely go to the gym once a month. How am I supposed to decide what part of the world I can save? There's so much of it burning, and I have maybe one thimbleful of water."

"Why do you have to save the world?"

"How can I not want to, knowing what a messed-up hellscape it is? Knowing how many people I could help if I just knew where to put all of this wanting? But instead I just... feel everything,

and it all hurts. And that's why I write poetry. But it's just pain on paper. It's not art. It doesn't do anything."

Y pushes himself to his feet and touches the wall of the cell in X's direction, and he wishes he could move through stone like a ghost.

"Do you get it?"

Y nods. X still can't see him, perhaps will never see him. "More than you know, kid."

"So do you see why it should be me? We'd both be getting a fresh start, in a way."

"Not so fast, kid." Y looks at the clock outside the cell. "Well, on second thought... looks like we're running out of time." There are ten minutes left until their hour is up.

"Guess we'd better make our final choice," X says softly, but the words ring throughout the cell block, and then they laugh. "I just wish my final view wasn't of this ugly-ass ceiling."

Y sits down, leans his head against the wall, stares through the concrete ceiling, up to the sky.

FALLING APART

Emily Wykoff | ewykoff26@amherst.edu

Will this love die if unattended?
Abscising our petals, like peonies decaying
Feed for squirrels and worms and everything else
That wants to eat us alive

I can feel it pressing into my skin
The glory of being with you
Against the logic of my head
To the detriment of my heart

We're falling apart
Too quickly to stitch back together
The pieces fraying, turning us to mulch
Absorbed into the recycled earth

It's not that I don't want you
I do, far too much
Now my mind is breaking down
You're rotting my brains out

I wish I'd known going in
The way my soul would flake and fall
Forgetting to attach and protect
Leaving my heart bare for the taking

Now I wait
As the leaves fall and die
Decaying just like us
Volitant in the cold October wind

Falling just like we did
Detached and disintegrating, I'm buried alive
Into the decomposing landscape
Away from you



Art by Alma Clark '25

Mariam Beshidze | mbeshidze27@amherst.edu

She sat down at the table with her coffee mug, squeezing it with her little hands and absorbing the warmth that she desperately needed. Under the table her leg swung back and forth erratically.

She heard the door, and soon he walked into the kitchen.

-I'm starving. What's for dinner?

Ugh... She forgot. She had been thinking all day about how to break the news to him.

- I'll make you something.

He took three beer cans out of the fridge and settled on the couch.

- Bob is getting a divorce... Turns out he was sleeping with some college student... Can you imagine?

- Oh I can imagine... - she muttered to herself as she was flipping the omelet.

- What's that supposed to mean?

- As if you had never thrown yourself at women...

- When will you stop bringing this up? - he turned on the TV.

-I won't. - The woman suddenly lit up and turned towards him - you cheat and lie, then push all these things away... the lengths to which your mind goes to separate those two realities, you almost made yourself believe that it never happened just to cling onto the image of a "great husband and father"... you aren't just lying to me but to yourself. You are the one who can't face the truth!

- Where are my flip-flops? - the emptiness of his voice infuriated her. She couldn't stop vomiting the toxins out of her body.

- The audacity to expect me to stay silent.. you gag me, you push your filth down my throat and make me swallow it! You can't possibly fathom my pain... How can you be so indifferent?

– Oh come on, you are hysterical!

His laugh pierced her ears. It was cruel and cold. She stopped. He was completely deaf to her screams.

He couldn't quite understand. What was the big deal? Men cheated all around him. His father had cheated, no doubt. She didn't even know what an angel her husband was compared to his coworkers.

And yet her words stung him, made him feel nauseous. His mind stumbled upon a memory – the night he spent with Elsa. No argument, no list of all the things he had done wrong, no reminders of his endless responsibilities shoved into his face.. That night he felt free and light in his heart.. But the following morning, he tried to forget it... sickness crept up on him, he was plunged back into his world of responsibilities, endless cycles of traffic, the noise, the chaos, the constant news of war and suffering overseas, the inevitable doom looming in the back of his mind, and now with an added load, he had to continue rotting away at his manual job...

She didn't seem to appreciate the way he was toiling his youth away just to give her the house she always wanted, give her time off work to stay with the kids... He was exhausted, he deserved a break once in a while...

He couldn't hold it any more, she was pricking something inside him, a long forgotten guilt that he shut away, she was holding up a mirror to his face and he didn't want to look in. No! He hadn't done anything wrong. She was the one who was ungrateful.

The man's eyes were glaring. He was clenching his fists.

– You are the one who never stopped asking for more! Always reaching for the most expensive wallpaper... What a hypocrite...

That's how she looked at him now – her touch, her gaze, her words seemed so alien, so far away, retreated in the background. She could imagine herself in space, in nothingness, drifting away from him. None of them tried to reach out, hold out their hand. Their expressions conveyed a tragic sense of inevitability, acceptance, powerlessness. Nothing could be done.

– If only we had a fireplace like your sister does! Your sister, with her jacuzzi and Kandinsky paintings in her bigger house

with her better husband? You think I didn't get the hints that you so casually dropped?

Did they rot themselves?

- You are just insecure.

She felt part of her self was observing the scene from the outside. It all seemed so meaningless, a mere cacophony. Was it ever different?

In her memory, warmth was shrouded by struggle, love muffled by the harsh mundane demands of everyday life. It must have been there, at some point. The illusion of "a better future" and pipedreams lured them in, making their everyday sacrifices seem justified. Couldn't they have simply been happy in the present?

- You are ungrateful, self-absorbed!

She looked away from him, yet her gaze ran into the sight of a half-rotten apple on the window counter. The rot. There was no avoiding it.

Half-rotten, it looked strange under the sun invading the glass. She observed it from afar, lasered through it. You could see brown rings on the right side of the rotting fruit. Rings were covered with little sand-like beige specks that gave the fruit especially repulsive air. She couldn't look away. Hypnotized, she said without looking back at him:

- I filed for divorce.

Morning was cold. Soon it would snow. She shrugged at the thought of the looming winter.

She was tracing the contours of the family picture frames on the table with her fingers. It felt dusty, like chalk. Her touch was tender, yet indifferent, depleted of the warmth with which she used to caress her space. Her gaze was almost devoid of emotion, but you could still see a flicker of nostalgia in her deep honey eyes. Silence embraced her like a mother - made her feel safe and calm. It used to disturb her, but now she found her escape into it, as if silence was more real than sound. She was eager to stay alone, to be unbothered, undisrupted. Words only brought noise now. She felt exhausted, sat down at the table and screened her surroundings.

The apple still lay on the counter. She sliced it in half, like a surgeon amputating a rotten limb in an attempt to save the patient. She stared at the two halves. Expressionless, she listened to her thoughts. Nothing, her mind was as quiet and as clear as a night sky. She took the rotten half towards the trash and was about to drop it in the can, but her hand froze above the can. She squeezed the rot instead, the brownish mass spilled over from the crevices of her fist. She observed it, fascinated, as if trying to comprehend the rot. Where did it come from? When did it creep up on them? She felt sharp pain in her chest. Her eyebrows twisted, her lips trembled and gave way to a bottomless pit of her silent scream. She crossed her hands over her chest and squeezed the rot even tighter, held onto it for dear life. The liquified substance dripped on her clothes with a burning sensation.

The second half of the fruit was still lying on the counter, left there for the sun to rot.



Art by Cecelia Amory '24

TWIN-SIZED BEDS, WEATHER CONUNDRUMS, & STARRY SMILES

Siani-Simone Ammons | sammons27@amherst.edu

Typically, he swipes up & I think he's a sonnet-eyed Robin Hood. Who am I kidding? I am a romantic who believes time intervals between text messages sent & how quickly he doesn't respond & how

quickly I do signify something *other* than the fact that I am a speck of dust within a dust storm in Idaho.

but he's done this before and he knows that I & others blush when we
see his
decapitated Bitmoji & sure, yes, he has a girlfriend
at Brown and the only Brown that I know

and will know are my eyes & skin & yes, when we go to sleep at
night in boarding
school Hell, he'll end up in twin-sized-beds-too-small for 2
lusty teens but there's

2 anyway. Still, on mythical Snapchat we exist *together* like kids who
are scared & amazed at thunderstorms & lightning sparks. There, I told
him, as cheekily
as someone who feels as small as me could be to someone as
charming as him

with a fantastical girlfriend who sometimes migrates from Providence,
Rhode Island by male
manipulator-owned camaros, that he still calls his, that I want to be his
in, well, any season,

even though she's the one who named him, made 'em who he is:
manwhore,

or boy with the grin that makes me see
the stars.

She told him, last Spring, when they broke up that she invented all of the
shapes & answers to
puzzles that could put two serious people in beds that are college extra
twin size BIG

and sometimes even 3, 4, or 5 people. In less words, she's never coming
back to Idaho—"2 *many*
parties & new boys that make me feel stars"—no matter how much
he still claims she's the reason he has sunshine rains & his smile widens.

On Instagram, I'll comment: you're *HIM*, and this will get hidden amongst
all the other lovesick
fools. But, I'll still grin, yes, I will. I, bittersweet, will be reborn & reborn

until Snapchat rots,
replaced like Myspace & then he will hold another girl tender
like rain despite
the fact she's only ever been treated like hail.

And on days of rain, I'll think of him. One day, there will finally
be a serious downpour & I'll be a serious college girl still
asking him in the dead of night: *if we could ever fit together in
your head?*



Art by Erxi Lu '24

TO AN EVERGREEN WHO IS ME WRITTEN BY A SELF OF MINE FAR FROM HERE

Aidan Cooper | acooper26@amherst.edu

1.

there is no way to get you, not really.

there is only marble column in rippling bloodstain —
the leaves are clattering, you clutch your breath and your coffee
as if they were your last rations of heat
before winter. the hair you've tried and failed to volumize lays strange
against your ears.

you say something that stinks of oxygen,
something like *i can't stop*
wasting my life and i'm scuffing the ground at my chucks,
wondering when you'll start moving,
rasping those soles, the way they're supposed to grit.

2.

if you're a column you're a corpsed one.

you have hands where there shouldn't be hands,
put on backward, fingerless, fused to your neck to keep your
head straight,
and yet when we slump into autumn on a park bench
you turn when the man in your earbuds whispers
look at me.

i am not close enough to wishbone your ribs.
you will not hear me singing anything. i do worry about you.
you live forever in gasoline. you should try getting drunk.
i'll fill a watering can with softness
and slam it into your shins,
maybe then you'll recognize togetherness as not a doorhandle
but a pit.

3.

but there's a tree metaphor. somewhere.

somewhere in your fingers when they fling out toward sense,
somewhere in that misinterpretation between your shucked-off palms
and the corn of your teeth. somewhere
you survive where everyone else lives.
right, the music. clean your mouth, get dressed, go fuck yourself.
i am going to dance. i am going to make the moon my hips,
make the night bloat until it butters
my guts, make me wax.
but you are still rooted in space. eyes like
bedsheet stains or knots.

you'd rather eat the bodies than caress their mutations, despite
all your efforts you cannot grind yourself. in the gunk of rotted leaves
(that are not your own) forget your needles,
please just forget your blood.
but no. i walk you home early with our hands in our sleeves.
you think under no circumstances
are you allowed to tremble but you are a tremor who forgot only
to fade.

4.

i am giving you permission to end.

i would keep calling you a column, but that would imply
you bracing something,
and your hands are occupied cupping your face together.
how we rolled up the carpet so you could vomit
and not feel guilty about falling apart.
i wake up and it juices my heart, raisins it,
convinces me to pump it full of tears. when the water remembers
that we have one body, will you sing to me? someday,
when the world is a blue balloon that we live inside,
will you treat me to dinner, share a steak with me
that is not my thigh?
and then, then i'd like to meet you, say *i've heard so much about you*,
and i'd look in the bathroom mirror and trace what is left
near my eyes,
and, yes, and then i would step into the street as if
dropping an orange into a bowl,
rolling in laughter, in an emptiness that doesn't feel empty,
in gravity made gentle, and i would place myself outside
of the bruise, and i would peel myself and know
if you're still here.

5.

it is touching, not feeling.
that would be another thing entirely.

your head, my shoulder. boulder and slingshot.
every time you moan *i'm sorry*
another word becomes unusable. we're outside of an aquarium,
witnessing nothing but the soft fish of our lungs.
can i tell you something? you crumble for lack of crumbling.
imagine my mind. imagine washing tanks all your life,
and loving sharks. tell me what it means to
crawl inside the mouth of a thing
that can smell your insides. how i take off my clothes
like i'm speaking, how a shark could swallow my clothes
and assume that wet fruit of cloth

is my abdomen. when does skin turn into bone?
if only we wrapped our gums around each other, maybe then
you could answer me, and i could convince you
you're not invincible. but there is no way to get you,
not really. the line for the aquarium is already
overflowing, the twist
toward us. the trees jutting like monuments
to the stuff we will never be able
to hold.



Art by Isabella Fuster '26

INTRODUCTION WITH NO END

Mel Arthur | marthur25@amherst.edu

2.

Sometime in late,
i fragment at my being, watch my body turn itself up in the
shape of a palm that claws at my feelings, marking my gut with
heaps of silence that ever so often bursts into sound. i am
searching for you. i am wanting to unshed this need, mark my
despair into your lips. you are too far. i find
myself
turning into an opening for you

1.

it begins at my center. gathers in drops that tickle the absence
my feeling creates around you. i let the words chisel at your
skin, palms first so i can only hold you in whispers. you whose
flesh i want to sift through, touch the soil underneath, water
it soft. maybe we can become mud stretching the earth into a
circle with no middle. maybe

I am wanting you to sop up the puddle of me smeared in muck,
place the wet in the biting part of your mouth. Let me crawl
into you if only to make a home in your chest let me melt in
pieces so you can touch me.

1.

I tell you that i refuse to look too long at you and you lest my
aching pins you into my chest. which is a lie. I mean i don't look
at you which is to say i need to look at you. Turn your eyes to/
from the parts of my body pulsing in your air. Remove your
questions so you see how tightly i am stitching myself together.
How i bite ever so softly at the thought of knowing you.

3.

maybe I am learning not to hide from you when I rub the palms
of my fingers all over myself,
i hope that takes away how scared i am when i realize i could be
undone by you
here and there even in my refusal.

1.

that's all.

1.

i cant help but gaze doubly at the curves that distinguish your jaw from the night. i look away before our distance tinged wants constrict our knowing, reduce our present into weepy sighs glossed over with what it means to press into your skin

3.

if i listen closely, i see you remove a layer of yourself, simultaneously revealing and refusing to stretch to make a home for me. you tell me nothing as i thumb red dots into your skin, kiss every indent created so when you inhale, you drag into you bits of my absence

3.

Often, I remember the way you still my trembling. How the pages i etch into my skin are filled with feeling i want to hurl down your throat. i am sorry i cant remember. i am sorry i stand next to you with nothing but reverberation in my chest. My heart pulses at the beat of nothing. i am sorry i cant let you bring me joy. i am sorry you are who i cant follow.

1.

oh my selfish body
can we are we can we can we incomplete ourselves in the form
of distance
are we can we are we ruin with no inflection
am i can we am i i i i



Art by Isabella Fuster '26

The background is a deep blue with a fine, woven texture. At the bottom, there is a dark, curved shape that resembles a shadow or a part of a face, rendered in dark blue, black, and hints of brown and yellow. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

*When you lose control of your body,
you have just about lost all you have
in this world.*

*- Saidiya Hartman, **Wayward Lives,
Beautiful Experiments***

TOE ROTTEN

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I am just a body–
A body with words inscribed,
With meanings taped over my mouth,
And phrases to my thighs.

I am just a body.
My body belongs to guys.
I'm wholly unaware of pleasure
'Til any of them tries.

I am just a body.
My brows are smartly drawn.
Atop white skin they furrow
Atop brown skin they spawn.

I am just a body.
My pain abounds and bounds.
With zip ties 'round my wrists,
And feet glued to the ground.

I am just a body.
I am his willing doll.
I scream inside a void of darkness.
I dream and dream
I fall.
I am just a body.
They want to burn me at the stake.
I am someone's enemy.
My wraith makes the Earth quake.

I am a torrent–
Absolutely abhorrent,
A thorn in his side,
Labeled as, “whore for rent.”

I bear my body.
I tout my breasts.
I bite my lip.
I shift my hips.

I cuff my wrists.
I explore myself.
A traitorous traitor,
A torturous stealth.

Thinking of him makes me ache.
Having power makes me shake.

Power and play—
Two bullets beside me.
Slide the gun down my skin,
And stuff both inside my V.
Explosion! A blast!
Waves of pleasure—
Can't get past.
Just when I think it's too much,
Relief ebbs at last.
But even as I O,
I think about how he can't know.

Masturbation is a
Sick, secretive sorceress.
Self-pleasure is a
Gorge,
A gratifying goddess.

I am hyperfixated.
I see bodies everywhere.
When women walk past,
We engage in a stare.

Perfect plump calves.
Alluring amber eyes.
I realize my criteria for beauty
Is adopted from guys.

I
Sigh.

I am nobody.
How can I compare?
I turn away—
I recoil from their stares!
The best thing to do
Is just to not care.
His body,
A body,
Where do I go from there?

I am more than a conglomeration of blemishes and blush.
I am not the loudest, nor am I the most hush.
When I see him, I feel nothing.
When I see her, there's a blast!
I just have all this baggage I can't seem to get past.

If I am my body,
And I am myself,
Is it possible to ever put only
One on the shelf?

If I am a person
Inside of a body
Is there a way
I will ever get out?

Or will some version of his voice come out
Every time I shout?

Who hears me?
Matter of fact,
Who *fears* me?

Fear is the only welcome currency here.
You negotiate your status by how much you instill fear-
Or so I hear.

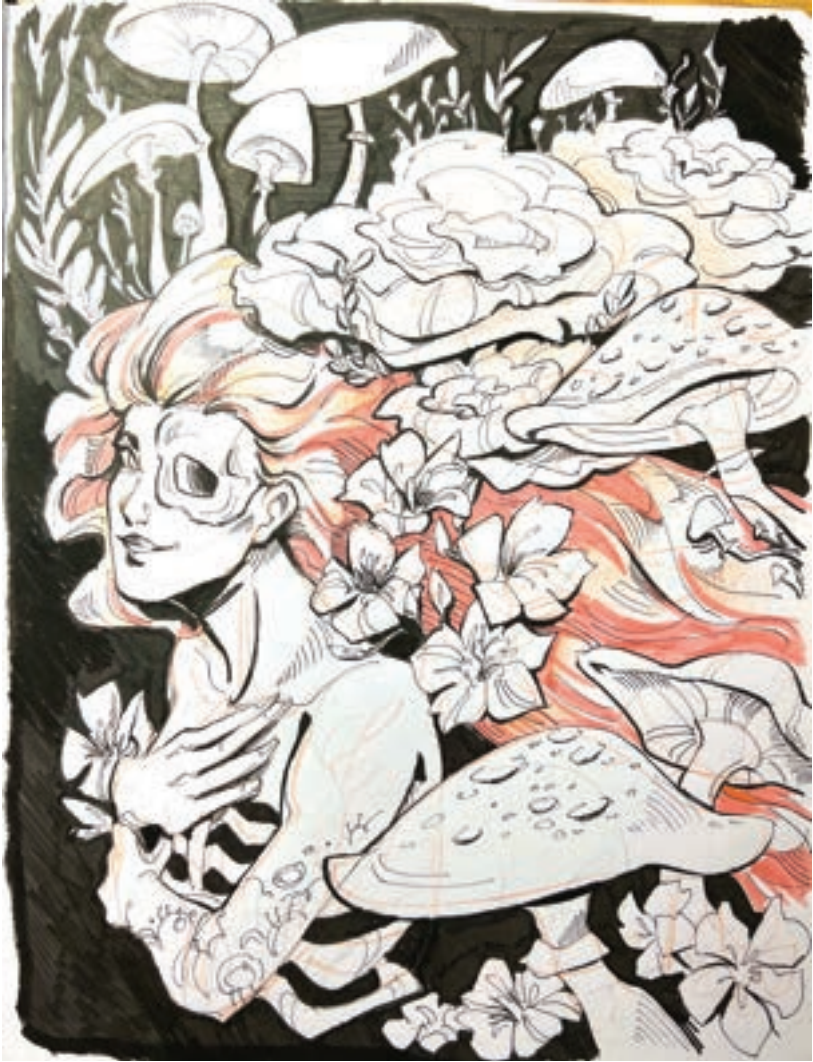
I display my body.
It exists in a cage.
I'm waiting for the moment when I can take the stage.
Want to exist without a body.
But all of this rampage
Must lead to something else...

Well?

To exist without a body.
To exist as someone else.
To exist somehow as me
And my body's something else.
To make them reconcilable.
To balance on the scale.
To control my body.
To escape this Hell.

One day, I imagine.
One day, I hope.
One day, I pray.

I let go of the rope.



Art by Desmond Shea '24

THE HORROR INSIDE, BEAUTIFUL FACES

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My mother liked to style her hair based on the white magazines, *Vogue*, *Cosmo*, the nice ones that she had to get a special subscription for, 5.00 dollars every month and delivered straight to our front door. The beautiful white model, carefully protected from the mud and dirt and grime of nature. The mailman made sure to hand it directly to our mother, the pages reeking of fragrant perfume. The same magazine lay on the counter, the shiny tresses of the women on the cover creased over and over again as my mother brought them to the salon to show to her stylist. She likes to do the same ones on us. Sometimes I liked to look at the magazines, at the beautiful women on the cover. I studied the slopes of their noses, and how the light reflected off of the shine in their eyes. After looking at the magazine, I always looked in the mirror, rubbing my fingers across my dark skin, comparing my features to theirs, my wide nose, dark almost dull eyes. Sometimes I thought about hanging the magazine on my mirror, framing myself and the entirety of what I should become. Sometimes in those moments of pondering, I would catch my sister glancing at me as I did this from across the room. Something lingered in her eyes, what exactly, I could not tell.

Tonight was a big night, so my mother told us, where all of her coworkers and superiors would be present. Something about her coworkers, beautiful and pale, was innately disquieting. Maybe it was their smiles, a little too wide to be normal. Maybe it was their clothing, always looking like they were pulled off a rack, beautiful, but lifeless. Or maybe it was their smell. The stifflingly sweet aromas, not comforting like my grandmother's sweetbread, or rich like the spices in the candied yams that my mother made for dinner. But sweet, overpowering, covering something that lurked just beneath the surface. Something ugly, something-

Or maybe I was just overreacting. My mother loved them. Loved their smiles, their clothes, their hair. She especially loved the way they treated her when she tried to look like them. *It was a study*, my grandmother told me. *To look at them not how we look at them but how they look at each other.* Neither me nor my sister were entirely sure what that meant at the time. But maybe we get it now. The women with bigger, shinier necklaces, or silkier hair, or stronger perfume were heralded. They parad-

ed themselves like shiny trophies hiding the truth. Something about that was appealing to my mother. She knew how they acted, around women who looked like herself, scoffing at the ones they saw on street corners, or in the grocery stores where they weren't used to shopping. My mother did everything to not be treated like that.

To prepare: we burned and dyed and drowned all of which constituted us as beautiful to fit what made *them* beautiful. The truth, *we*, died beneath the layers of what they thought was pretty. My mother, flaunting in her gown, usually fit for someone of pale complexions, was decorated much like an ornament, yet was an eye among *them*. They praised her dress, her silky strands, comparing them much to their own, the sweet, sensual perfume masking what festered, grew underneath with each of their words.

Come over here, she mouthed to my sister and I, cheeks pulled up gauntly into a smile. In our polished leather shoes, we shuffled, awkwardly, to hide behind our mother. With our approach their coos became louder. As I glanced over at my sister, I knew their words were indiscernible to her. Their flushed red faces gawked as they fawned over us, pinching our cheeks and pulling at our hair. In the same way as our mother, they complimented us, complimented *her*, for being created in *their image*. Their words of adoration echoed through my ears, seizing my heart and soul. I became cognizant, remembering the small tear in my tights and the straight-ironed coil that had fallen out of my hair. My back straightened, covering for these flaws as my own cheeks warmed in response to their attention. The shift in my energy was palpable to those around me, my mother's hand becoming a warmer presence on my shoulder. I stepped out into the white light of the room, opening myself to them, but knowing what I lacked. My sister hid, still, covering herself in the shadow of my mother.

I could understand my mother. Understand her love for them, wanting to be like them, wanting to be *them*. I remember her telling me of the first day she walked into work, as poised and refined as one of those ancient statues, they first gawked, then praised her. Revelled in her. My mother spent most of the month's rent to buy the clothes she wore to work that day, and yet, there was not a shot of regret in her eyes. We were upset in the following weeks, as there was barely enough money to buy the necessities. My sister cried herself to sleep almost every night.

But I understood her. I wanted their dresses, and their hair, and their smiles, and their perfume. Most importantly, I wanted their attention. Under their gaze, I died, but I grew. I grew from the parts of myself that I wanted to throw away. I grew for them.

I looked over to my sister, my cheeks encased in a rosy grin. Her face startled me, much unlike those that were around us. Much unlike those that reflected beauty and poise. Much unlike those whom I wanted to be. Looking at my sister, her almost lifeless eyes a grim mirror of my own. I could now recognize what I was seeing in her eyes. It was her expression, the contempt, the anguish, most importantly, the horror that hid behind her dull eyes, it was all directed towards me.



THE GREAT WAR

Sydney Williams | sywilliams26@amherst.edu

Before the Great Self War of Identity, there was simply Sydney. As a young girl, I was an avid reader. I loved getting lost in the worlds of stories and following the adventures of young heroines. I would solve mysteries alongside Nancy Drew; I would swim among the fish as a mermaid alongside Emily Windsnap; I aspired to fly among the fairies of the *Rainbow Magic* series. The women I read about in stories were reflections of myself. I saw my best qualities, like my artistic nature, reflected in Claudia Kishi and my responsible older sister nature represented by Beezus Quimby. I also saw some of my not-so-great traits in these books, like the know-it-all tendencies I shared with everyone's favorite witch, Hermione Granger.

Jia Tolentino, the author of the novel *Trick Mirror*, also recounts having a similar love of young heroines during her youth. And again similarly, Tolentino and I both had a similar experience in realizing, as she puts it, "identity could govern our relationship to what we saw and what we read" (142). In the fourth grade, I was in the library discussing one of my new favorite series with my friends in the library. The *Thea Stilton* series followed a group of young female mice as they set out on various adventures. Of the five mice, I related to Violet the most; she was artistic, slightly introverted, and kind. At recess that day, my friends and I decided to assign ourselves to characters in the book to play for our game. When I stated that I wanted to play Violet, I was met with silence and stares. My friend said she thought I would be a better fit for Pamela. I was confused because Pamela was a strong female mechanic. Again, I stated that I would rather be Violet, and a different friend responded, "No, you're the brown mouse." I, like Tolentino, realized that despite feeling like a part of me existed in every book heroine, to others, it didn't matter that I was smart like Hermione Granger, artistic like Claudia Kishi, or responsible like Beezus Quimby. Those identities crumbled. I was the quintessential masculinized black woman. As a black girl, a rule had been created for me: I could only identify with black female characters. My identity went on to limit so much more than the characters I identified with; according to the girls around me, it determined what I could wear, who I could like, and what I could be.

My girlhood crisis officially began when I entered the 6th grade. And from the Violet situation, I was learning that my identity could be an obstacle in my friendships and everything else. In a matter of months, my worldview had shifted. Suddenly, my best friend in fifth grade traded me in for a group of friends

that were all thin, white, and “stylish” (I use quotations because, according to the questionable fashion choices back in 2015, this was sadly stylish) and popular. I quickly learned that the world regarded me differently than it did to my white peers. I remember an experience in which a black boy in my grade told one of my black friends that they could potentially be an eight if they straightened their hair. And thus, my beauty suddenly didn’t exist to me anymore. It wasn’t just the girls at school that made me realize I wasn’t beautiful like they were. The media I was consuming taught me a similar lesson; even the black models I saw in magazines had straight hair and lighter skin than I did. This became my new standard of beauty. I learned that others saw me, my hair, skin, curly hair, and nose as undesirable. The first lesson Girlhood taught me was that I was far from beautiful. That knowledge festered in the pit of my stomach like a rotting apple, and it’s hard to unlearn.

The second lesson of Girlhood was that with the perceptions of others now determining everything I couldn’t be, I was desperate to figure out what I was allowed to be. I leaned into the personalities of my new black female friends, who were both slightly quirky and very nerdy. I don’t know if I ever made an active decision to adopt the quirky, nerdy girl as my identity or if it just slowly became that (back then, the idea of being unique was very appealing when it is not so much currently). I became so over the top during this period of my life. I wasn’t entirely pretending every time I opened my mouth. But I had dialed everything about myself up to 100. I genuinely believed if I leaned into this version of myself that I had created, people would like me. I had adopted a social script, not based on what I wanted but on what I thought other people wanted out of me. But I was still rotting inside.

I felt like I was losing myself. In adopting my role, it had seeped into my nature. I soon couldn’t differentiate between the persona and the person. Rather than safe, I felt alone and lost. I was rotting. My Girlhood made me lose myself, and it would take me years to find the old Sydney again.

The third lesson of Girlhood is that what seemed like the worst experience ever was a necessary adventure. Not exactly like my fourth-grade heroines, but close. By junior year, I threw away my social script and opened my authentic self. I saw myself in characters that looked nothing like me again. My journey through Girlhood was bumpy and, at times, challenging, but I came out a fully developed version of myself on the other side. I finally allowed myself to be beautiful even if those around me couldn’t see it—no more rot. And with the Great Self War of Identity finally over, I could be simply Sydney again.

THE WORM'S CARESS

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Statement of Matthew Ingersoll, Regarding Earthworms

I've always hated earthworms, you know. Repulsive slimy wriggly little monsters. I know they're supposed to help turn over the old soil, redistribute the nutrients from all the rotting things, but I can't see them like that—like they're helpful. I can't believe some people think they're cute. They don't even have faces! They just wriggle through the earth, all around us, endlessly eating. Multiplying.

I used to see them all around, when I was a little kid, you know. And not where you'd expect to find them, either. Always *inside*. I would lose, like, a ball under a table, and crawl under to get it, where it's just a little too dark to see properly, and I'd put my hand in one, or sometimes several, all slimy and dirt-covered like they *had* just come out of the ground. I would be doing the dishes, and pulling the last one out of the bottom of the sink to rinse, and a worm would wriggle out from under it, as if the thing had been trapped there, and crawl down into the drain so fast I only just saw it go. I thought I had imagined it, several times.

But it kept happening. When I was ten, my great uncle died, and we all had to go to his funeral even though I'd seen him maybe twice while he was alive and he didn't seem to like me much. But there was a viewing in the funeral home and I went up with my mom and dad and my little brother, and I looked in, and his whole face was just crawling with them. And I know earthworms don't eat people. I don't think they were. It was more like they were, I don't know—caressing him? The way they crawled over his face, leaving him all *wet*. I was transfixed. I thought I was going to throw up. But my family, who were standing right next to me looking at him, didn't seem fazed at all. And when I looked at him again, the worms were gone.

I had nightmares for weeks after that. Even during the day, sometimes it would feel like one of them was crawling over my hand or my ear or down my— well, I always flinched wildly and looked all around, but I never saw one on me. I still saw them in odd places, though. Always slipping out of sight.

Eventually, though, I grew up, I buried my great uncle's memory, finished high school and went off to college. I didn't see a single earthworm—outside of where they're supposed to be—for at least a decade. Until about two months ago.

Back in May, I went to this rave in an abandoned warehouse with a couple of friends, and they pretty much abandoned me to get high off their asses with a couple of pretty girls. A rave's not much fun on your own, so I went wandering Bronzeville late at night. I can handle myself alright, so I didn't figure it'd be dangerous or anything.

I saw this streetlight up ahead, flickering dull orange, and in between one flicker and the next, a man appeared. He was wearing a brown pinstripe suit and a matching fedora that concealed his eyes. He just stood there as I approached, not moving a muscle, until I got right up to him, when he turned and started walking away before I got a proper look at his face. I was curious, and bored as hell, and so I followed him. I don't know why I didn't say anything to him. I think I knew he wouldn't answer.

He led me north into an old train yard. There are lots of those in the city. Some part of it, I think was still operational, but there was no one and nothing but a few rusted cars where he led me. He opened a similarly rusted utility door onto a dark stairway and proceeded inside. It was damp, uncomfortably so, and smelled faintly of mold, but it was cool, too, and I began to think of the creeping things that might be crawling through the Earth around me.

We reached a room, faintly lit by an ancient bare bulb in sickly yellows and oranges. The walls and ceiling were concrete but the floor was dirt, and the room was bare save for a sculpted dirt slab with a polished, new wooden coffin sitting atop it, fresh flowers arranged all around, just like they had been at my great uncle's funeral.

The man stopped next to the table and took off his tie, and then his suit jacket. Finally, he took off his hat, and I stopped dead. There, pitted and swollen and rotten, was my great uncle's face, eyes and lips and remaining teeth transfixed in a beatific smile. I saw his arms properly, then, and they were crawling with more worms than I had ever seen, flowing and circling over the flesh in endless, mindless patterns. He pointed at the coffin, and I realized that it must be my coffin, and he or whatever power sustained him now had chosen me to share his fate. To feel the worms embracing me forever as I felt them even now creeping up around my ankles, cold and damp and *dirty*.

I turned and ran, back up the wet and molding stairs. They seemed to take longer than they had going down, even though I was climbing them as fast as I could, and I heard the Earth rumble and felt it shake all around me, as though something was coming, rising out of the depths, mouth wide open—

And then I saw the door, still half-open, and I tore through it and ran all the way to the nearest Redline stop, twelve blocks away. When I got back to my apartment I showered for three hours, but I still felt that crawling, clammy touch.

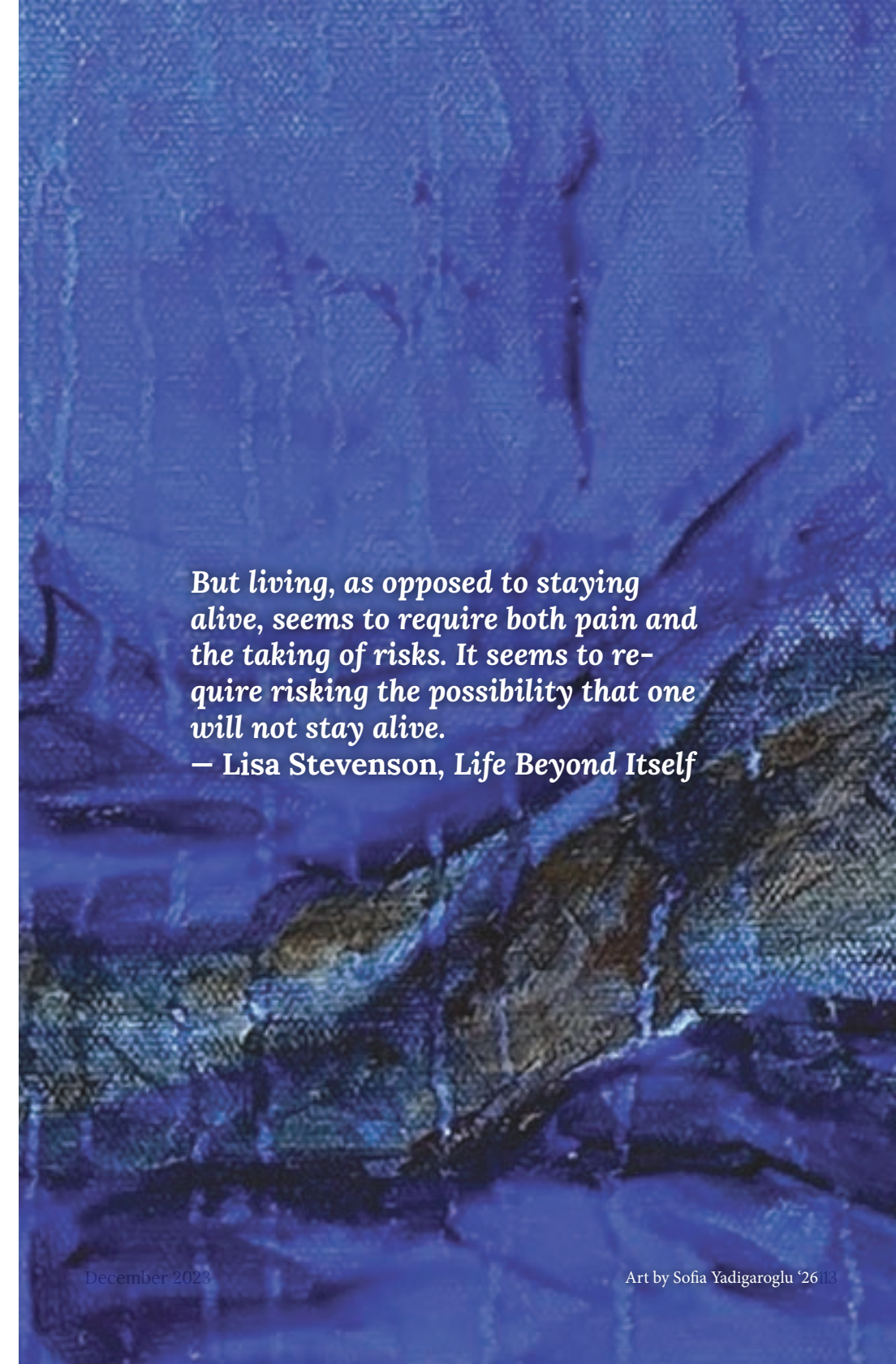
Ever since then, I think I've been—pursued. I keep seeing worms, little ones, wriggling just out of sight, or just in the corner of my eye. I haven't gone back below the earth, not even down to a basement. In fact, I try to stay off the ground as much as I can, but I know it's no use. I know they're coming for me, that he knows where I am, and that I can't keep above ground forever.

And I am so, very afraid.

Archivist's Note: Three months after giving this statement, Mr. Ingersoll stopped attending his job at the Board of Trade. All further attempts to contact him have been met with failure.



Art by Jacinta Smith '25



***But living, as opposed to staying
alive, seems to require both pain and
the taking of risks. It seems to re-
quire risking the possibility that one
will not stay alive.***

— Lisa Stevenson, *Life Beyond Itself*

SHOOBA

Awa Diop | adiop26@amherst.edu

It began every Sunday at dusk. I started to believe her moans dragged down our Sunday sun and beckoned it to set. The unnatural sound always rang too loud and plastered to every inch of space. Its waves showered rice fields and disturbed calm rivers miles away. Once in a while, she interrupted her howls to release a shrill that sliced through the silence of the village. It stunted the flock of birds migrating Westward, frazzling them into different directions. The noises contorted faces into pity, annoyance and fear. She frightened us children to run home and tuck under our mother's bosoms. Mama always shooed me away, so every Sunday I ran to Auntie Mina's arms who received me with a stealthy laugh. She thought my fear was nonsensical, but never loosened her grip on my small frame.

I believe her name is Assa. Or perhaps it is Aissa. It's been a while since anyone has referred to her by her name. Whenever Mama whispered it to Auntie Mina, her tired tongue never allowed any of the syllables to properly fall out of her mouth into my ears. Her real name is not important anyways, because my friends and I have given her a new one. Chief Toto's *Shooba*. She was the third wife of the Chief, only married one month ago. I've seen her once, during her wedding arrival. Mama did not want me getting in grown people's business, but I was with Auntie Mina when the Thursday *Shooba* came to our village, Kolikoro. Auntie Mina had to see and know everything, and Mama thinks I'm just like her. True and false information lovers is what she calls us.

Shooba was a tall woman. If I had to guess, I would say she was taller than Auntie Mina. According to Auntie Mina, her back is hunched, so she must be even taller than I saw. Auntie Mina also said she was old. Too old to just get married. Apparently, she was twenty-seven years. Fifteen whole years older than me. Auntie Mina says no one in her old village wanted to marry her despite being a princess of Sanagerè, so she must have had some problems. Her guess was that she could not have children or something. She thought the Chief Toto was getting married for money, and I believed it when they said there was to be no ceremony for the wedding. She told me to never let myself get that old before marriage. I remained silent, but nodded my head vigorously.

The first Sunday after her marriage, we heard a sharp cry at sundown. Mama assumed Auntie Adja, her close friend seven

mudbrick huts down, was going into labor and having her fifth baby. She ran to grab her waxy scarf to tie around her head and quickly washed her hands of the dinner ingredients. She directed me to grab the gift basket in the living room, and together we ran to her friend's side. But as we got closer to their hut, Aunty Adja herself was trying to locate the persistent moans and screams. As curious faces peaked out from behind curtains, the eyes of the villagers started to trail towards the Chief's compound. Some bold villagers went closer to inspect the issue, many ready to offer a helping hand. As a medic walked out, his lifting of the heavy curtain amplified the noises behind him. He reassured everyone that all was well, and to excuse the disturbance that he promised, was to end soon. It lasted for another four hours.

Perplexed all four hours, the villagers came up with all sorts of theories. Questions floated around: *Did something happen to one of the Chief's wives? Which one was it? Could it be the Shooba giving birth?* Aunty Adja had proposed her own theory that the third wife had some chronic illness. When the loud noises finally subsided, total silence fell over the village. No final answer was reached, but Chief Toto's compound was the talk of the village for days. Nor the Chief or any of the three wives whispered a word of the incident. By that Thursday, the odd incident was forgotten. Until it happened again, at the same time, from the same compound. The rumors came back, with more fuel than ever. The villagers were determined to get answers.

It wasn't until this most recent incident, that I heard anything concrete. Maié, my best friend, told me she got a peek inside Chief Toto's compound. Specifically, she saw inside Shooba's hut. She said the moan slipped from the Witch Wife's small lips, as she hunched over in pain. She described her discolored back as aged and tired, as if the skin had been relentlessly tugged on for years. Naked on the floor of the mudbrick hut, something solid and white leaked from her tired, rotten left breast. The right one, according to Maié, looked perfectly young and normal. As the stuff leaked, it pierced through her nipple and sliced its opening each time.

Maié swore they were cowry shells that she had seen her mother fondling around to fortune-tell. The shells were attached by strings of breast milk, and fell in curious patterns. Maié's mother told her that these patterns from the Shooba's breasts told fortunes. She said that is why no one in her old village married her, for fear that her powers were because of a demonic spirit. Her mother believed she was a witch, which is how we named her Shooba.

Shooba never came out of her hut. I would not have believed she was real if not for that day I saw her. Yet, every Sunday for the past three weeks, she would moan and yell in pain to assert her presence in our village. Her moans never failed to frighten me, and her suffering disturbed my grounding.



Art by Cecelia Amory '24

BRAINROT

Serin Hwang | shwang27@amherst.edu

some songs make me think of you.
earworms till through my brain matter,
electric guitar leaving earthen grooves in my body.
i retrace lines like i would retrace my steps in an old forest,
stretches of crumbling fern pointing me
to the same verses
again and again.
i press replay
and the song starts over,
a cooling body
infinitely replaying its entire life;
and i'm lost in the forest again,
and my pulse is a tangle of piano wire,
and i wish,
again,
that i could compose
myself like you compose
music.

waking up from the noise is like rot in reverse:
first, the decay of the last note.
second, the dead leaf
crackle of corroded speaker wires,
static buzzing like flies running the scales
of a fish's corpse.
third, my emerging hum,
faltering like a rust-broken record
trying to grasp the last threads of
the first verse,
the bridge,
the slow heartbeat of the bass.
the human heart blooms
with flowers that thrive for the duration of a sustained note,
which,
relatively,
is not very long in the grand scheme of things.
amidst greenhouse gasses thrumming at an imperceptible octave,
we're nothing.
we're surrounded by dissonant noise
and infinitesimally short moments,
and yet i'm still here trying to compose myself
as you decompose me.



Art by Kyla Bischocho '25

NINE LIVES OF A CAT

Fahim Zaman | fzaman25@amherst.edu

I.

Who knew behind the twelve trees'
ceaseless tears of fiery leaves
and those hundred and one river
coves of green shade there were
only a lone pair of amber eyes?

II.

My cat is immortal:
He was born today.

III.

I found claws, and wear black furs,
Brush daily, grew out my whiskers,
Yet perchance I look in the mirror,
I see someone else; I see her.

IV.

I have watched treehouses, cars, stars,
And you cry, move on, lose your first tooth,
Your first beating from ma,
Your first friend, and I
Made friends with your toy dinosaur
Lost behind the fence. And I have watched,
Watched you make love, your only parent die
From a car crash, move out (the loneliest years),
And move in, and marry. The wedding was here
And I came uninvited, and soon after,
Mary was invited into this world, first-born, and –
And your death soon after and you died, you died and
I never found out why and no one would tell me
And I can only cry when it rains. But I have watched,
Watched Mary cry, move on, lose her first tooth,
Her first beating, and found, by the fence, a triceratops.
And I am thankful forever that you have buried me
Here in your backyard, my love.

V.

Dawon slit Old King Tom's throat,
nine siths pull him up the moat,
Kasha steals his ghost, you have the most

beautiful voice, and all because
Your mouth foams blood from a blackbird.

VI.
Froth flourished from
gray autumn grave beds
Of the Dickinsons freshly washed of moss. Boot
Stamps the mud,

I ran in the breath of trees, such
Ecstasy: I had drowned Emily
Just as she drowned kittens!

VII.
Number divine! Heavens seven,
seven kittens! Yet even so
One is still so alone.

VIII.
LUNA, i ate yesterday, and all night
i spent cleaning the mess. you'd
be surprised at the gumminess of cat bones
or at how I cried.
but when I woke up this morning,
it had snowed; it had been so long.
all the color gone, branches breaking,
apparitions, dante, and it was all so
so SUBLIME.

Oh, ah how I cried.
were you thinking of me then too,
LUNA?

IX.
Medleys rain on silhouettes, passing foggy LEDs;
Cardboard boxes full of the saddest roars.

ROT GIRL SUMMER

Tapti Sen | tsen25@amherst.edu

Decay exists as an extant form of life, or so they say. So even my rotting, motionless body must be continuing to live and breathe. Is it bearable? It could be, if I so wished it. Do I wish it? I wish that—

This, too, shall pass. Your organs degrade inside your body. This too, shall pass. Your heart putrefies in your chest. This too shall pass. Your blood evaporates, seeking new life, like rats abandoning a sinking ship. This too shall pass. Your eyes are the last to go, cruelly, so you are left watching your own decomposition, your own self-cannibalism. This too shall pass. You pass.

Is autocannibalism a consensual process?

Consent is like tea. It's not real if given with a gun to your head. But when you gnaw on yourself to survive, who asks permission of whom? Who gives it?

Is consent tea? Or is it blood on your hands?

But I digress. The show must go on! The show must go on. The show must. Go on. The show. Must go on. Go on? Go on.

If you want to know the secret to happiness, it is this: A pause button, for everyone and everything to stop. No, don't look worried — it's just for a minute. Just for an hour. Just for a day. To get yourself together. To remember what it is like to breathe and love and have kindness for others. To remember what it feels like to live.

Decay exists as an extant form of life. So I am existing, surviving, in some sense of the word. But there is more, I know there is more. There must be more.

And that's why: I hold you close. I whisper to you gently, I love you. I don't want you to be worried. It'll be okay.



Art by Rachel De La Cruz '26

UNPEEL

Venumi Gamage | vthotagodagamage26@amherst.edu

The edges of my mind are lifting up –
there's dust and dirt settled in so no matter how hard
I press and smooth my fingers over the peeling perimeter,
nothing I do will
stick it back down again.

Sitting on my bed, curved protectively over my intestines,
I feel the overwhelming urge to grab an end and rip them
right out,
watch what tears off and sticks.
I want a great gust of wind to rush through
like when you flap your blankets
and for a moment time freezes,
and a sage green canopy is
suspended
in the air,
And you wonder what lies beneath
because how can something swell so, without infinitudes
bearing up under it?

I'm scared to discover what lies beneath.

My God is the Unpeel Queen,
She heaves
something that has settled behind the skin of her neck
undulates
something beyond my comprehension
slipped overtop of her belly
– she is not hollow, just unknown, I know this –

I watch her turn it on, *people-please people-please*, almost as
natural to her as when she unravels in front of me – *her hair*
is static electricity – Medusa taking off her sunglasses – she
is armless, limbless, she has no ears her ears have just
detached – she is a knife, sparkling – and she carves
meticulously into the centre of my stomach, and then stabs
up. Manoeuvring with a surgeon's precision so I don't bleed
to death, but stand there skewered,
gasping
Looking into wild eyes that look just like my own

Moments like this, I see where I get it from.

And when it's all over she
Rolls back up
to look like a body again
– A little sloppy,
Something personless glitters from within her,
We both ignore it –
she brushes my hair back
And blows air on my forehead that has somehow gotten bruised.
And just like that the stain of blood
is but a sweet poppy, swaying stupidly,
sellotaped to the middle of my mind.

Ten thousand miles later,
And two years away,
Cool breath whistles under the sides
of sticky tape now unsticky,
I can feel my brain fluttering,
any moment now it'll take off
arcing into the sky,
and I'll only be able to run helplessly after it,
falling short at every leaden step,
Inadequate. And afraid of what I am left behind with.

RED

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A Jet moved across the sky
a Meteor to hit the Sun awry,
yet it escaped unscathed
saving the Sun's fate!
I breathed a Sigh of relief
and joined the Smoke from the Jet,
Sweat evaporating in its wake,

Yet soon Sunset arrived,
the Sky a bleeding red
and Sun a throbbing said;
I realize the Meteor did crash,
Leaves soak in this flowing Blood
And fall down to grieve this raging Flood -
Oh what it feels like to
Be a falling leaf -
in Fall
Scabs of wound
Of a crying tree tall,
Oozing a red velvety cushion,
Mild wonder of a mission,
Fluttering red hearts going up
Swaying by, saying bye to those
that plummet to the Corpse Blanket below -
Winds carry their words
the Murmuring Gushing and Shushing,
and drape them Whispers on my ear -
but Spiky swords of Grass near
Pierce through this Cover here -
more Blood!
so I Bow down to Protect my ear
and visit the Spectacle dear, dear -

Everything screamed hues of Red and Shed
so I looked in the mirror
Red Glint in my eye!
I plucked to form a Ruby
and throw towards the Sky -
For the Sun to catch
and spill more Blood
in case the Meteor strikes
And the Sun Sets
again...

ARACHNOPHOBIA

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Most people are unable to feel spiders, their spindly legs and round bodies. The species does not matter—recluse, widow, trapdoor; they all run and climb the same, and even the largest tarantulas can squeeze into the tiniest ears. I have found that a spider steals a memory about four times a year, one for each season; that for each spider you kill two more follow suit.

The first time a spider climbed out of my ear I was six. It was carrying a little crumb in its jaws, and I slammed it under my palm until there was nothing left but goo. I tried to squeeze the memory back into my ear, but it was already lost. I find there is no pain in losing memory—it is only in remembering something that it hurts.

Most spiders will steal at night. A little slit in the eardrum, and they slip in. On the way out, they sew it back together with their silk. When the victim wakes up, they cannot tell. Maybe there's a weird dream or a scratching sensation in their head, some general sensation that something's off. Maybe there's an odd headache, or one ear's a bit duller than the other for that day; but people never notice until they try to remember. And even then, they will shrug, because they cannot remember what used to be so important.

I killed spiders for my parents. They wore earplugs at night, though the spiders always found a way in. So I would stay up all night, a flashlight and fly swatter in hand, waiting for that dangling silk thread or those skinny legs dancing across the floor. But those spiders wandered around my father's heavy eyebags and my mother's callused hands, coming for me instead, who'd sleep at the corners of classrooms and restaurants and at the back of cafeterias and school buses; eventually, it was the solitude of empty bars and gray cubicles.

When my parents passed away I inherited our little home, a one-story glorified hut secluded in the woods, and there was no one else for the spiders to steal from except for me. I never felt them at first, but little by little I'd wake up feeling as though I missed something: smiles when there was nothing to smile at; tears when there was nothing to cry at. An aching desperation in my heart I couldn't form into words.

On some nights they came in droves under doorways and the chinks of window, the creaking floorboards and the leaky ceil-

ings. They grew brazen enough to wait in plain sight, infesting the house like cockroaches; I stopped trying to kill them. One night I woke up to an itch in my ear. It bled with spider's blood, and a river of tangled bodies and legs drained out of each canal. I do not remember if I was dreaming then or not.

They steal from us because they cannot form memories of their own. This is what my research suggests. They are simple creatures; they do not know the experiences of joy and passion, bitterness and spice; what it means to feel. To understand love and compassion, sorrow and pity, the fire and honey of life—spiders have never experienced such things. Their instincts are primal in nature: an understanding of sex and hunger, movement and combat, pain and pleasure. The bare necessities for survival.

But they're aware. They know something exists beyond their perception, so they steal. They adapt in cunning ways: sneaking in at night, a chemical-resistant exoskeleton, long legs for fast movement. A spider carries what appears to be a little crumb out of the ear, yellow like a fragment of cheese. This is a cruel act: a memory cannot be reclaimed once a spider splices it. It changes form, becomes alien to the brain, like copper breaching oxygen. Hold a spider's spoils and one would find it weightless, empty, existing only because one sees its shape and color, only because its weight and feel were imagined. I have held it in my hands. I have watched it vaporize into nothing, though my hands couldn't feel the difference.

I remember each and every spider I have killed, though it is difficult now to remember people's faces. Their voices and scents; an accent or dialect, a catch phrase they'd always default to. The shape of their nose, the color of their hair, the hook of their smile. I remember each and every spider I have killed, the dried globs of blood stained on my notebook pages, the fragile feel of their shiny legs crawling out of my ears.

Yet I cannot remember. I cannot remember anything from before I turned eighteen; my notes and diaries remind me of the details: girlfriends, essays, late night talks with friends. College anxieties. Concerns for my memory, anxieties over my life—I have forgotten these. I have forgotten the meaning of language; 'passion' is just a word to me. Love, sorrow, loneliness. Those are just words to me, too.

I have begun writing everything I remember in my notebook—the age of my lost memory will climb, from eighteen to nineteen to twenty, from years to decades. Entire blocks of my life will be empty, existing only on paper. But I am not afraid. Nor am I

sad. Spiders come in quietly, like a blank envelope slipped under the door, a bridge that learns to sag, a copper statue that begins to rust. Something you never notice until it has changed. Truly changed, empty.

Yet there are spiders and only spiders that fill my head. I hear the echoes of their legs against my skull, feel that scratching sensation behind my eyes. And when I try to reclaim what it was that I have lost, I can only remember that I have forgotten.



Art by Cecelia Amory '24

UNDER THE SUN

Bryan Jimenez Flores | bjimenezflores26@amherst.edu

It was tradition that when I'd finish enough of my work I'd take the rest to the kitchen table and accompany my mom and the chores. She always told me that the water and suds and cleaning chemicals would make my hands crack and bleed, so the most I could do was keep her company. It was ceremonial--

Are you lonely?

No, it's alright.

I feel bad you're out here.

You don't have to.

Can I do something?

No, but you can sit. You've got things to do.

Well you do, too.

The ceremony wouldn't end until she sat across from me bringing back all our family. This is how I met my grandfather and grandmother, my great-aunts and their husbands, the men and women that almost married my aunts and uncles but because of a last-second accident or cold-turned-lethal-illness never did.

My favorite stories were about my grandmother:

...I feel bad you're out here.

You don't have to.

Can I do something?

You can sit. You've got things to do.

Well you do, too.

She showed me pictures of my grandmother. I've only seen one of two blurry images of her--both in sepia--with her hair in a tight braid and wearing the apron she wore everywhere. In neither photo is she smiling or holding anyone but my aunt Rosa; she stands surrounded by all her children. My favorite story is

from five or six days before she died. My mom was young and asked my grandmother what she'd do if she died. My grandmother responded, "I'd die too."

My mom quickly responded back, "Mama, if you die, I'll die too."

My grandmother's heart broke for the millionth time, knowing how sick she felt and how well she'd hidden it. "Don't say that, baby. The sun rises and it sets, and if your mama dies you keep living for her."

A few days later my uncle and my grandmother had an argument. He was her baby even though he was grown and married. They argued and argued back and forth until, at an impasse, they let the room go silent.

"Her voice went real quiet and she said, 'The next time you come home, I'll be dead, *mijo*. And you'll see how they bury me and you'll remember me, and you'll see how they pack and beat the ground into the ground with stones and shovels and you'll remember me, *mi niño*.' And we all stood still."

A week later her words came true and the whole town saw how my uncle couldn't bear to see his brothers pound the dirt with large egg-shaped stones.

I met my grandfather through stories too. My mother told me two types of stories about him: ones so that "no man born of me or mine ever treats a woman like he did" and ones so that "you don't fall into the trap of calling some people good people and others bad." It was with a smile that I learned that I smiled the way my grandfather did.

I once saw a relief in a museum of a Maya king calling to his ancestor for wisdom. On the left was the king, looking up as the smoke bore a face and body and words worth listening to on the right. The key detail was that the spirit looked different from the king; he was Olmec, not Maya. The Olmecs were an ancient people to the Maya, and to be a king who could trace his dynasty back to the Olmecs proved impressive royal pedigree. My teacher interrupted my guesses for what it must have been to see the dead face to face, asking "if you could ask your dead, wouldn't you?"

And I looked up again and saw the faces my mom drew for me years ago. My dead's bones and skin long taken back by the earth. And yet their words rang in my head, scattered and faded since all memories fade and distort and go up in smoke;

no memory is the same each time it is recalled. I now take every opportunity to recall my dead's stories. I now say "you can sit" and I talk about my grandmother and my grandfather like I met them, I tell my parent's stories like I saw them happen, I lean on my dead like they're beside me. Their tragedies are my tragedies, the signs they saw born again in different clothes.

I left home, at first only for the summer and then for a month and eventually for most months of the year. My mom told me once that not even my youngest niece would sit in my chair at dinner time, as if they were mourning me. I learned that I could only speak good Spanish at home, and if I ever did anywhere else it was with my parents' inflections and rhythms combined. Just as she invoked the voices of the family tree, I invoke my parent's. Just as she'd speak out exactly what our long dead had said--and even sometimes what they should have said, had they been more clever or honest or brave--I called forth all they'd said when I talked about home.

Are you lonely?

No, it's alright.

Let me give you company.

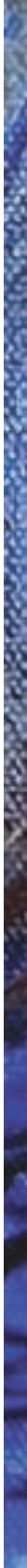
You don't have to.

Can I though?

You can sit. We've got things to do.

We do.

Nada hay nuevo debajo del sol/There is nothing new under the sun.



The image features a close-up, textured view of a blue fabric, possibly a quilt or a piece of clothing, with a central circular pattern in shades of brown and gold. The fabric has a visible weave and some fraying at the edges. Overlaid on the center of the image is a quote in a serif font.

“Much-handled things are always soft” – Toni Morrison, Sula

LIFE AFTER THE PHONE CALL ENDS

Jackeline Fernandes | jfernandes24@amherst.edu

After the phone call ends the wet cobblestone beneath my feet zooms into focus as the cracks between the rocks partition my field of vision and I look upwards as the world begins to recrystallize around me, waves crashing against the silhouette of La Isla de Santa Klara in the distance, the sound inundating my ears like that of digitized voices and one of my compatriots is yelling in Spanish with a hint of American Southern drawl, she's on the other side of the street and her words are muffled as if I were wearing noise-canceling headphones, *vamos a las escaleras que nos llevan al mar*. And so we run to the stairs that lead us to the sea, slipping slightly on wet cobblestone and now weaving in and out of the slow walkers shuffling on the boardwalk of Donostia, a city with a thundering seafront that has the aura of a man in his early thirties agonized by unrequited love, and now we're sitting side-by-side with the others on the rusty metal stairs, our eyes following the only swimmer in the late October Cantabrian waters, his white European skin dimly illuminated in the dark by the reflection of lamppost lights skipping on the waves and I find myself ruminating about the in-betweenness of our location given our proximity to the French border and the palpable French influence on the city's Old Quarter—is he Spanish, or is he French?—and in my peripheral vision a small light flashes on the horizon reminding me of Gatsby. The tail of my scarf is blowing onto my friend's shoulder but there is a mutual understanding that we are to keep the configuration of our parallel gazes uninterrupted, our eyes searching for meaning in the steady beam of light leaping from the invisible lighthouse of Santa Klara and I begin to wonder if the civilians on the French border in Hendaye can hold this light in their palms or if it falls through their fingers—what if this adagio of light is a metaphor for my current existence? The Cantabrian Sea filters into the Atlantic and I wonder if those way westward can sense the light in my hands and I question why everything has fallen quiet, the silence around language has an unhinging effect on reality that sounds like poetry and so I question why everything is starting to sound like poetry again because when everything is poetry I am unwell, *espera*, my friend says as I descend to the water, her grip is firm on my shoulder and the closeness between us pulverizes, replaced by a sense of distance when our gazes collide though the sisterhood remains and I try to become a sound when I say I'm going to have to leave, I'm going to have to leave you in the winter and she says *vamos al mar juntas*.

SAUDADE

Clara Chiu | cchiu27@amherst.edu

The envelopes began arriving over two months ago: blank white rectangles slipped through the mailslot at odd hours of the day. At first, they gathered in a pile on the floor before I took pity and relocated them to the kitchen table. There wasn't any return address, but if I held them up to the light I could see the faint outline of a letter inside, the imprints of each word carved into the paper. It's interesting – to think that a letter contains a multitude of itself.

But I can feel your impatience. I am narrating this to you, Mother, so that you will remember me for more than a memory. – *What is your obsession with letters?* you would say. This is what you said when I told you I was going to spend the rest of my life studying words. You say I'm an author. I am, in fact, a writer. The distinction is crucial: an author writes *for* an audience. A writer writes to an audience. Yet perhaps I'm wasting my time, speaking to a listener who won't respond.

—

On the fourteenth day, the envelopes had overflowed from the table in a white cascade. A stubborn pile of snow, insensitive to the changing climate. I packed them in a cardboard box and stowed them in the back of my closet next to the bouquet of dried lavender.

They say there is room for only one story on the page, and I cannot tell whose it is.

—

When you said you had something growing inside of you, I thought you meant guilt. Until your eyes, already recalling the future, spoke what you could not. How the presence of the tumor was realized by the paper held in your hand. How you offered this paper to me as if you could pass off the reality of it. And then: a light touch on my shoulder. To confirm, for a brief moment, that I existed. To think that my existence could somehow reconcile the fragments of before and after. Yet when you reached for my shoulder you touched only a child, awoken into a nightmare and seeking refuge at your feet. – *Did you know?* The word hysteria originates from the uterus. A seed of mania borne in the womb, born to the world, a bourn between the before and after. The existence you sought for was still being created: the child, a bundle of hysteria, swaddled in a fleece blanket like a mummy.

—

I saw one once: a mummy, trapped behind a clear glass case in the British Museum. You took me there to marvel at the victors of history - not the stories of the artifacts but the stories of who possessed them. We stood at the foot of that unnamed mummy until a respectful period had passed, until linen wrapping blended into yellowed bone and the mask meant to hide death had become its face.

I tugged on your sleeve. - *Why did we come here to look at a dead body?*

- *It isn't just a dead body. It's a piece of history.*

- *How long does it take for a dead body to become a piece of history?*

You pause. - *Seventy days.*

—

We are not all too different, you and I:

1. *Because we put our hand to our chest and felt a stranger.*
2. *Because, when the drug took effect, we watched our hair fall to the ground in clumps and felt relief.*
3. *Because after they stitched us back up we had to wrap our bodies in bandages to reveal the imperfections.*

—

Perhaps I'm not being fair, assigning you a fragment and calling it a whole. Now that I possess your story, it seems wrong to inhabit a body already broken by itself. Is this what it feels like to be written: to be a nameless corpse examined through glass?

But while you sought for a name, I ran from mine. The word was an expectation I thought I could escape through distance. It was not mine to own, but yours: one you had shaped in your mouth long before I existed, the vowels stretched between your teeth, wrapped in a judgment I didn't want. I wanted only to leave behind the village and all that was wrong with it. And so I mistook home for Omelas, diluted the past with the length of a country. Yet when the hysteria had settled, I was left with a name stripped bare of history. *But what is in a name?*

- *what is in a name* you said when they promised just one last test - *what is in a name* you said when you took your last dose of tamoxifen - *what is in a name* - yet, in the end, you have finally reclaimed it. Your name, curled in the back of my throat. Your name, lying heavy over your chest, each letter carved in stone and decorated with lavender.

And so, I address this letter to you and seal it up in a white envelope.

After all, who am I writing to – if not a piece of history, gone seventy days?



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THE INDICATOR

KO I

VOLUME III ISSUE I