

B R I D G E S



The Indicator

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EDITOR'S NOTES

Mel Arthur, Gabrielle Avena, and Sarah Wu

Mel Arthur:

What do Bridges mean to me? I want to invoke Christopher Soto and what they wrote in the book titled *Queer Poets of Color*. They borrow a quote from Gloria E. Anzaldua, who writes, “Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning *tierra entre medio*. Transformations occur in this in-between-space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries.” Phew. One more time... phew.

I was struck by this definition and rendition of the word and therefore wanted to strike the same meaning with my piece. Specifically, the part about transformation within precarious spaces, allowing one's self to be face to face with who/what/ever is on the other side. For a bridge to me means the gap, the distance, the yearning to be closer. A bridged body is one destroyed, a bridged relationship is one crafted. To bridge means an understanding, the indestructible urge to hold and be held. I bridge to you, you bridge to me. God knows how much we need that.

I allow the bridge to be the thing that the self uses to give dominion over to another, a wicked thing, as Morrison calls it. The bridge is the history that one needs to face because facing it means being in contact with reality, as my friend Baldwin says. Let me stop liberal arts-ing and speak frankly. My piece touches on distance and a complicated sense of care. The words sit apart, divided, unable to bridge towards one another. The bridge exists in flesh, in the shame-love-touch of the subjects. The semi:colon is the threshold, is the very act of shifting consciousness. It's a wild thing, unstable. There lies the bridge to me. Its uncertainty and ability to disarm have left this piece hard for me to stomach, but I remain in some ways transformed by the theme, and I bridge to you now, asking what the theme has incited within you.

Gabby Avena:

To name a bridge is to make the in-between a site and location. Extending on two planes—the horizontal and the vertical—these sites deny flatness, deny singularity. To bridge is to reach towards dimensionality, and in doing so, towards each other.

What I mean to say is that as a means of connection, the bridge denies us (lonely writers especially) of our tendency towards isolation. This concept can be understood through the skill of relative pitch. Whereas possessing perfect pitch allows one to identify a note precisely upon hearing it alone, relative pitch is the ability to identify a note by comparing it to a reference note and finding the interval between the two. In essence, a person with strong relative pitch can hear two notes and tell you the interval between them, but not the notes themselves. The emphasis on relationality within relative pitch allows one to better tune themselves towards their companions, allows the music to achieve harmony, allows for the musician to play by ear.

In this issue of *The Indicator*, we are writing to the relative pitch of the world. We are identifying the interval. In each story, the writer's message resounds towards the reader, whether through a concrete structure, through some fantastical threshold, or even through the invisible ties of familial duty or romantic desire. Are you listening, dear reader, for the bridge?

For what is important about bridges is not where you were before nor where you are headed to after, but what lies beneath it all. Come and share this bridge with me. Stand with your feet planted on the boards, feel them wobble and shake. Do not look beyond nor back. Look, instead, at the water below. Peer into the waves, see them swirl beneath your feet. Listen closely, for they are reaching towards you. What resounds in your own in-betweens? What words, what name, exists for this distance?

There is only one way to find out. Take my hand; let us dive in together.

Sarah Wu:

I am at home when my brother tells me he has jumped off a bridge with his friends. We live in Long Island, so there are bridges aplenty. Which bridge? I ask him; he shrugs. He tells me he doesn't know. He tells me that his friends have parked a boat underneath the bridge for when they surfaced. They swim and pull themselves atop the gently rocking boat, giggling all the while—the thrill of trespassing, of doing something casually illegal that it doesn't quite become illegal.

It is a little ironic that the tale my brother offers me is the opposite of the short story I have crafted. When I look at him, his eyes gleam. But I am an older sister, so all I do is worry sometimes. I take the story that my brother has given me, and like a wet towel, I clutch it with my fingers and twist it. A metal basin

sits below to catch the droplets underneath. It is with these emotions that I write my new story.

The symbol of a bridge has become so prolific within our culture that it arrives in our minds prepackaged with preconceived notions. We build bridges to bring together individuals. We bridge our differences. At a first glance, a bridge is a symbol that already comes to mind, complete with its narrative themes. But what happens when a bridge no longer does what it is originally designed for?

A burning bridge disintegrates. A bridge in memory fades into consciousness. A bridge between worlds breaks the earth's atmospheric bubble. A physical bridge can be jumped off of.

In this issue, I invite you to consider the complexity that your unique perspective may bring. Venture beyond what a bridge commonly represents within society, and with this in mind, I ask you as a reader: what do bridges mean for you?



ENTERING THE ARCH

*Physical bridges. Calm, stable. Pieces that discuss the
larger world in a non-personal way*

WATER BENEATH THE BRIDGE

Willow Delp | wdelp26@amherst.edu

The water was brown.

The Brabantio family had adamantly tried to ignore this fact—even the more progressive members politely refused to comment. It was a trick of the light, the photos had been edited; it was not at all relevant to the gas pipeline; thank you very much, and besides, the energy needs to come from somewhere.

Nobody knew exactly how it had gotten that way. It had happened just quickly enough for people to notice—but when historians pored through their stuffy archives, they saw that it had always been tainted, just less so. It was once clear and blue; with a beauty that underlined the exquisite nature of the Ruby Palace. There were reporters that had commented on the fish that swam underneath the wooden drawbridge: fat koi fish, with fanciful patterns on their gills that seemed befitting for the human royalty above. But the fish had been gone for years.

The palace was still beautiful, after all. Its marble walls glistened in the sunlight (it was always sunny now) and the alabaster color prevented it from boiling as much as the rest of the outside world. It was the summer palace for the House of Brabantio. Every year, in late June, the drawbridge would ceremoniously extend—marking the beginning of the royal family's lavish getaway. Their fashion was distinct: an array of pastels for the women, sweeping gowns of rose-pink and baby-blue, and sharp tan suits for the men. In the past, the queen had been draped in glittering gemstones, but it had only attracted questions of their origin and demands for their return. They were quietly tucked away in the Brabantio Royal Archives, and only brought out for special occasions: coronations and the like.

The extension of the drawbridge was symbolic of the Brabantio family's commitment to building bridges with the rest of the world. Their PR team had drafted a list of approved words—Unity. Connection. Togetherness. ("Union" had been suggested, but it was immediately connected to *unions*, and hastily moved from the whitelist to the blacklist.) With the freshly-printed press rolling off the racks, the royal family was ready for the show.

Their procession had begun early in the morning, to avoid the worst of the heat (a largely unsuccessful endeavor.) The security team was ready to fend off reporters—especially the infamous environmental extremists. They were the Brabantio family's

worst enemies, what with their constant demands and pesky protests. Thankfully, it seemed that most activists had decided today's procession wasn't worth it.

The police team's guns glittered in the sunshine.

The royal family began to cross, slowly and surely, over the wooden drawbridge. They walked, every step measured, hoping to maintain this moment for as long as they could. The glory was fleeting; the beauty short-lived.

They did their best to ignore the beads of sweat building on their foreheads. The women, in particular, felt their thick foundation begin to melt. The men were a little better off, but their stiff dress shoes and starched suits still provided no comfort. The sun scorched with a vengeance.

But still—they would be moving into the palace—the beautiful Ruby Palace—and within the walls, there were no problems. It was not hot, nor cold, and they slept soundly, sequestered far away from the screams of the damned.

Until.

The pipeline running underneath the drawbridge had burst.

The flames slashed through the brown water, angrily ablaze. It danced upon the surface, snapping at the dress shoes and high-heeled slippers from above, delighted by the scene.

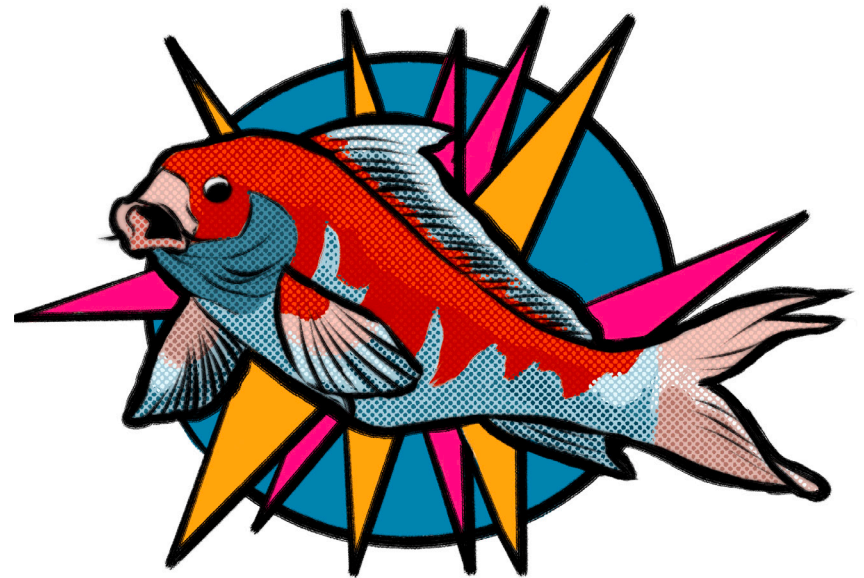
The procession broke into chaos, the still air punctured with shrieks and curses and prayers—*God save the queen*—and the brown water had never seemed so close, and the drawbridge so fallible. So wooden.

The police clutched their guns, wracked with confusion. They were far away enough from the drawbridge for their own safety, but *dammit* they had to do something—and, with frenzied glances from one to another, they wondered where to shoot. Could they gun down the fire? Could they kill it?

It was a futile thought. In the end, judgment took its course. The drawbridge caught fire.

They all fell.

The koi fish readied themselves. At last, they thought. A feast.



Art by Cece Amory '24

STARS FALLEN FROM THE SKY

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A blonde woman stands on the Brooklyn Bridge, waiting. Lifting her hand, she brushes a strand of perfectly curled hair into her scarf. She waits patiently, eyes staring off into the distance.

People pass by her. They barely notice the blonde in a Burberry trench coat with a pale gray suitcase. The New Yorkers keep moving. Always forward. Never back.

The woman checks her watch, blue eyes lowering to face the analogue machine on her wrist. Whatever, whoever, she is waiting for is late. As expected. Or maybe she's just checking the time.

Standing on the Brooklyn bridge one can't help but remember that Nick Carraway preferred the Queensborough. That this isn't seeing New York for the first time. This is not some idealized variation. Not a sparkling, 1920s-esque fever dream. That whoever is here knows this city. Where to go. What is happening.

Or maybe she simply likes this bridge better.

The woman waits, and as the sun begins to set and the lights to dim nothing changes. She simply takes a seat on an empty bench, her red lips glowing in the twilight.

It begins and ends with a woman waiting, a woman watching, a woman breathing. A woman's desire to be treated better. Gatsby and Daisy. Elinor and Edward. Catherine and Heathcliff. A man and the object of his desires.

But she waits for no man.

The woman's red lips could have been fire. They could have burned the whole bridge down. No one would have batted an eye. It would have been a remarkable power. Instead, she does nothing of the sort. She crosses one leg over the other, shifting in her seat.

One would think that this kind of waiting would be the beginning of a love story. Moments like this are always perceived as such. A strange circumstance, someone always meeting someone at the exact right moment. Women with men trailing after them. Sunsets and kisses at midnight. Waiting. Waiting for the right moment.

New York at night is fascinating. The buildings shine, like stars fallen from the sky. The world lights up. The city that never sleeps stays wired. Caffeine fueled and nicotine addled. People stay up and the world stays magical.

The people roaming New York at night pass right by the woman on the bridge. Too drunk on alcohol or life to notice her, someone out of place but not strange. A gorgeous woman who can blend into the background. Make herself almost invisible. So classically beautiful she's almost a statue. People walk by her, making no note of her appearance. She sits, angelic, a woman out of time. Out of place. Out of mind.

No one enters the Brooklyn Bridge late tonight. Somehow she got it closed off. Maybe with the power of a wink or a smile. That remarkable power of her red lips. Or maybe no power at all. Or maybe it's all a fantasy.

The blonde is left sitting alone, smiling into the distance. Her red lips, more maroon in the darkness. There isn't enough light on the bridge, but the city sparkles, dancing off of the water. Manhattan and Brooklyn separated by a shining strip of sea. Crossable only by man made structure.

The woman moves, unzipping her suitcase and pulling out a pair of pink pointe shoes. She reaches down to tie them, crossing the ribbons with a perfectionist's precision. She pulls off the scarf over her hair before standing and shaking off her coat to reveal a short black dress. The tulle skirt flows beneath a halter top, sparkling with the help of Swarovski crystals. The shining of the cloth mirrors the decadence of the city. She drops her coat onto the bench, leaving her belongings on the Brooklyn side.

She straightens, placing her arms above her head.
There's a pause.
Only for a moment.
Only for her.
Or maybe only in her mind.
New York, the loudest city in the world, is silent.

In a single movement, she begins to turn. She drops one arm, then the other. It's not Balanchine, not Graham. It is something of her own devising, something beautiful.

The blonde dances from Brooklyn to Manhattan, stretching her limbs before the New York City skyline. And, finally, she stops, once again looking into the distance. Once again waiting.



A SCHOOL DAY ALONG 城門河

Priscilla Lee | prlee25@amherst.edu

Along the banks of 城門河 are flower beds, bike lanes, and concrete paths, and a class of PE students are huffing through their mile run. An old man with his fanny-pack-radio strolls by, swinging and clapping his arms. One of the girls sweats past him and wonders if swinging her arms like that would propel her forward in this deathly test of fitness.

Nowhere else in the world would the dirty water they're running along be deemed a river, but in this part of the island-peninsula-city of Hong Kong, surrounded by government housing, old factory buildings, and tiny apartments, this waste-passing canal is 城門 River.

The eighth grade girls PE class is from a school on the other bank. Three seniors from the same school are under a bridge with a camera—their big brothers and big sisters—hiding from the humid April sun. They're trying to shoot a short film.

"Have you seen *Cléo from 5 to 7*?" asks the student filmmaker, an emerging auteur (who's learning *la langue française*). "At the end of the film, they walk towards the hospital where she's about to find out the results of her biopsy. She probably has cancer, and he's probably going to die in war. But right now they're walking, and looking at each other, and the camera walks with them. I want you to walk just like that, out of the shadow of this bridge and into the sunlight. The camera will take a while to adjust to the changing exposure, so you need to hold your gaze. Walk slowly. You'll think it's way too slow but on camera it looks normal, got it?"

Our actors don't know what the short film is about, for the student filmmaker heard that 王家衛, the famous Hong Kong auteur, shot a whole film while his actors didn't know which character they were playing. That man is a genius, and our auteur thinks she's somewhat of a genius, too. So all our actors know is that they're going to walk as if to their deaths, or to the prognosis of their deaths.

The girl and the boy have never had a prognosis of death, but they've been newly flushed in love (in real life, not in the short film, though perhaps also in the short film—the student filmmaker hasn't told them yet), and are waiting for a prognosis of love. They haven't decided what to do with their love, or if it is truly love, which our auteur loves. She imagines that their

indecision, their pushing and pulling, will sparkle in the space between their gaze and electrify the screen, that as the sun shines into the lens and washes the shot with white, this shimmer of hopeful anxiety, of lovely pain, will be as magical as the blurry dolly rails in the French film she's referencing.

In the DVD extras of *Cléo from 5 to 7*, director Agnès Varda said they reshot the final scene when they realized that the dolly track (on which the camera was steadily moved to walk with the lovers) was visible in frame. So they reshot the scene, but the magic was ruined. It was not the same. Cléo's eyes did not flicker up and down in the same way, the close-mouthed sigh of her shoulders tingeing her smile with something of a grimace. José's flared nostrils did not swing into view as he turned his head, nor did it shake a little, as it did before, as if unsettled by the great force of looking at her. They reshot the scene, but it was not the same, so the clean, dolly-less shot was scrapped and the mistake was immortalized in the final, most memorable scene of this masterpiece.

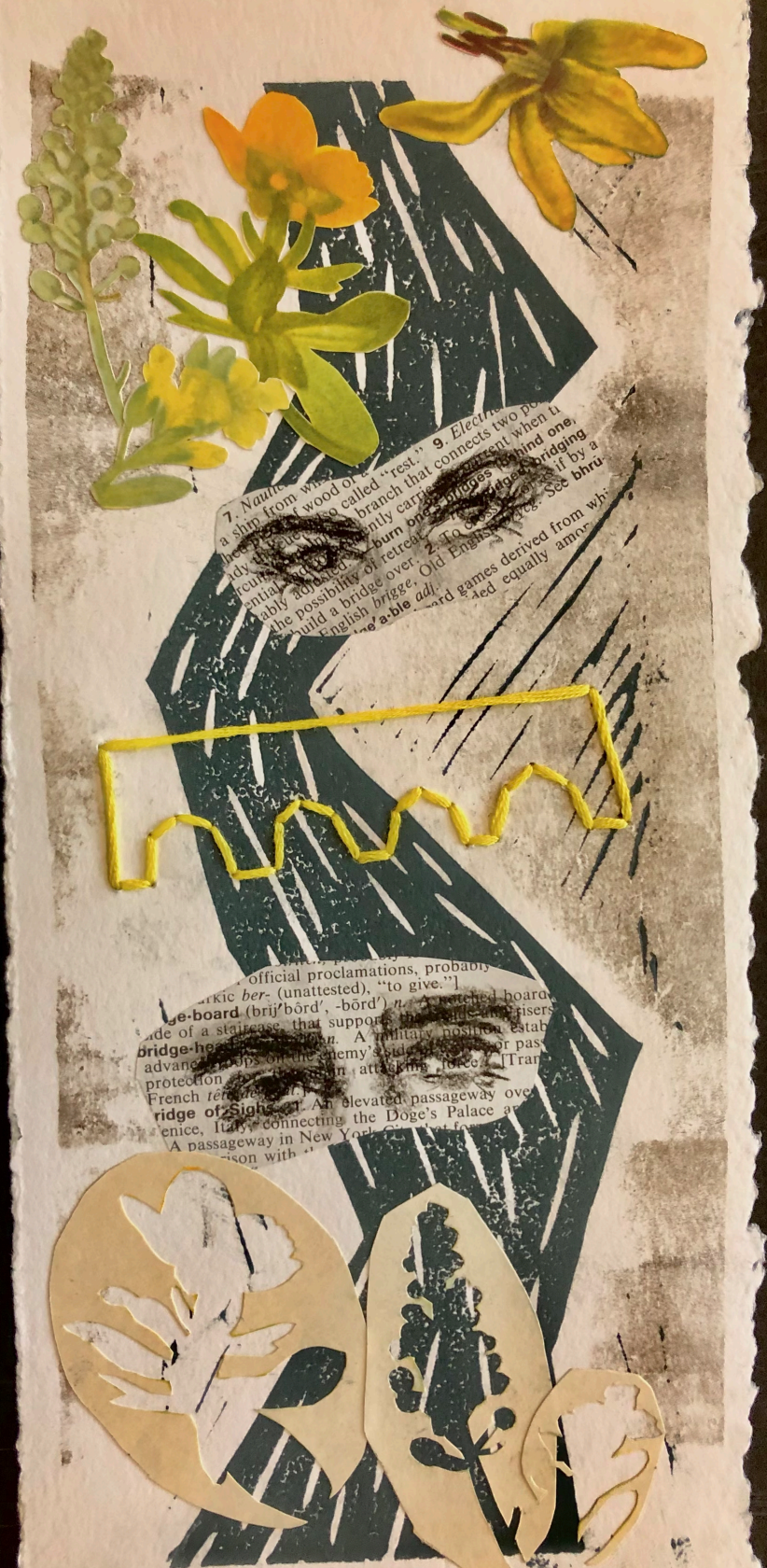
If we were shooting this at any other time, our student auteur thought, if we were filming this walk by 城門河 at any other time, it would not be the same. A month ago the couple had not yet been flushed in love—what they're pretty sure is love—and were still preening and puffing and turning away. A month later and they might have untangled their indecision, either tending to soft-cut wounds, or resting comfortably in a more familiar gaze. Now, our auteur thinks, now is the perfect time.

3... 2... 1... and action! The boy and the girl walk out from under the shadow of the bridge and into the bright sunlight. It is awkward on their necks, to walk with their heads turned just so. The girl gazes up at her newly beloved, at the red pimple on his chin. It's not yellow yet, not ready to pop. But above each eyebrow, he has a tiny wound, with little dried blobs beside. They form a triangle across his face. He gazes back at her, his first sweet love. There's a mole straddling the edge of her upper lip. It's almost a hemisphere, with a satellite planet (a tiny punctuation dot of a mole) off to its upper left. What would it be like, if they ever grazed their love with a touch, to connect the dots of his pimply face, to kiss the wrinkles of her beauty-marked lips?

Our auteur, now desperately trying to keep them in focus, does not know the exact quality of the magic she's capturing. That her lovers, never having gazed at their beloved so, are discovering that the other is not as beautiful as they'd thought. Her face is a bit wonky, and he kind of looks like a monkey.

They're sweating profusely as the sunlight washes through the camera lens, as they walk again and again with necks stiffly locked. All the while, pupils, nostrils, patches of hairy skin, tumble through their fevered minds. O what glorious sights to fuel a flaming love! That big monkey ear and wrinkly mole, the sour smell of her damp uniform shirt—all flowing through the other's senses—but their memories cannot catch them. They would meditate for nights upon this day, when they walked, again and again, holding each other in their gaze. But they won't remember, will never remember, exactly what they saw, under the bright April sun in the magic of the camera, not touching, not speaking, just walking.

The girls are running back, at the end of their mile, their diaphragms in stitches and their throats tasting blood. What a long mile it is, measured from bridge to bridge! They watch our trio: big, scary seniors with a big camera, and wonder—what is their film about?





A SPOT OF POND

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The woods were broken, Willa decided. The woods were broken, and she didn't know how to fix them.

The Earth always died when December came, but she still found a beauty in it then. Willa lived for the crunch of frosted grass underfoot, and a cold scent sitting heavy in the sky. It came after the first snow melted, but before the second and third and many thereafter which compounded into the formidable white sheet that made Massachusetts winters what they were.

Willa was eight, and was allowed to wander the woods on her own. There must have been a time before, one where her mother and father doggedly looked after her every step, but she couldn't remember it. When Willa stepped off the school bus, her father was still at work, and her mother played with her baby brother Toby. She dropped her bookbag on the couch before and pulling her sneakers back on and running off until dinner, banana in hand.

Unlike her past adventures, this day's walk was muted. What's worse, she took nature's silence for granted, and found it to be something that made sense. Willa had forgotten how to listen. There were chipmunks scrambling between branches overhead, but Willa stumbled through the rotting logs without once looking up. Her class was taking a field trip the next day, and she was carefully weighing whether Lucas or Bea would be a better bus buddy. On patches of dirt along her path she passed iterations of her closest confidante, Edward the Newt, without so much as a glance in his direction.

The further she got from home, the more her enthusiasm waned. She drew her sweatshirt sleeves over her fingertips, and the wind carried nips to her ears, not stories.

A plank carried Willa across a spot of pond. She crossed it often, and sometimes even dipped her toes off the edge so that they could grace the lily pads. Willa's breath was raspy, and she could feel all the work it took to bring the frozen air to her lungs. She sat, and all she saw beyond her were tones of gray and beige.

In class, Lucas had been bragging about how he could skip a stone five times over, so Willa brought over a handful of pebbles with which to practice. The first skipped once before sinking, with a destabilizing ripple on the water's surface. The second



landed next to a dragonfly, which flew off in panic as the stone plunged straight into the water's depths.

She turned the third pebble between her thumb and forefinger, before extending her right arm way out over the water, her right foot raised like a ballerina mid twirl. Her left one gave out, and with an sudden sharpness Willa's heat was stolen.

She stood out of the water, which was only waist deep, shivering. Her palms were scratched and swelling, and her chest started to heave. Willa looked out along the landscape she had disrupted with anger. For the first time, she saw no beauty in the scene.

The woods were broken, so Willa walked home.

7-11 PARKING LOT

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I don't usually give bums money because I know they'll just use it on drugs. I have such profound empathy for those experiencing drug addiction, and I would hate to enable such a vicious cycle. If anything, I'll give a member of the unhoused community my leftovers from dinner. It's the kind thing to do, and eco-friendly, too.

But I wasn't thinking, and I gave him cash. The unhoused man outside the 7-11. I should first clarify that under typical circumstances, I would never go to a 7-11 (I don't support big chains). But I was meeting my plug in the parking lot, so I compromised. One of many moral compromises I gave into that night.

His leather jacket, camo pants, and combat boots were almost chic. But he looked tired, and his clothing hung loosely to his frame, and not in an anorexic model off-duty way. It occurred to me that maybe his weathered look was not a stylistic choice, but rather an allusion to legitimate veteran status. I have profound respect for the heroes who fight so bravely for our country. Surely I had the patriotic duty to acknowledge a man's fearless service with a buck fifty, cash. And here is where I abandoned all principle. My fatal flaw, if anything, is that I care too much.

First, I needed to gauge the legitimacy of his veteran status. To determine whether or not he earned his scars as a patriot or a bum. I would walk past him, but I would not engage. I would look his way and say nothing.

She approaches the 7-11. He stands by the entrance, but not close enough to be registered by the motion sensor of the automated doors. Her pace slows before entering the store. She looks toward him, and in doing so issues an invitation. Her brief glance is consent to engage.

"Darling, could you spare a dollar," the man asks.

"Oh, I don't have cash on me, but I'd be happy to buy you some food," she offers.

He relents. "That's very thoughtful, but could you spare a dollar, sweetie? I almost have enough for a pack."

I trade my dignity for a cigarette, feeding the bloated egos of the ostensibly “woke” upper classes in exchange for their spare change. I smile and address them as sir, if it’s a man, ma’am if it’s a woman, and darling if she’s pretty.

And the stench of my desperate pandering lingers. You can clean your hands of blood with warm water, but no amount of rubbing can get the smell of cigarettes off my fingertips. It’s easier to get away with murder than a smoke. The smell is a reminder of my will’s failure to intervene between desperation and a cigarette.

But desperation is not the fatal sin. It is simply the space between desire and its indulgence. But tonight I am not strong enough to bear it; I fold to the hunger, and this time not for cigarettes.

He takes her money, and with the change he had earned from earlier in the night, he goes into the store. He comes out of the 7-11 with a pack of cigarettes; it was blue and wrapped in plastic. She wouldn’t know the brand, she doesn’t smoke. He peels off the wrapper and opens the pack, reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a lighter.

He hands her a cigarette and issues a final request. “Can you do one last thing, sweetie.” She liked that he called her sweetie. “Could you smoke it for me, to keep the smell off my fingers?”

To keep his hands clear. No stench will taint his conscious tonight.



Art by Evelyn Chi '25



Art by Piper Mohring '25

WILDFLOWER HUMANS

Bryan Jimenez Flores | bjimenezflores26@amherst.edu

"No one and nothing, boy, we were born from a daisy." It was in that way that my father grew up understanding that his mother was named Martiniana, who was from Veracruz but had moved herself to the state of Puebla during that great national conflict that would repeat itself every one hundred years when the people realized (months before being summarily executed) that they were being exploited by the wealthy, and that his father was Abram, son of the herb that also gave birth to the plague that killed Doña Fausta's—Don Arturo's mother's—peach bearing trees. The entire town mocked him and some threatened him with pesticide when he approached, but no one had the heart to tell him that his father was not a wildflower human.

It was in this way that the countless ancestors and near-relatives spread across the world were untethered from my father in perfectly non-violent erasure and would never be tied together again. Erasure like that cannot be reversed, like taking a good idea written down and thoroughly scraping the paper of its ink and then being told to have the thought all over again. By the time Martiniana's son had my sisters and I, the family tree had been so vigorously abandoned and mismanaged that no effort was made to remedy the trunk for years, and so the entirety of the family came to accept that somewhere, somehow, there had been a weed that gave birth to us all.

I traveled to their remote town to find it. I got a plane ticket from Newark to Mexico City, took the bus my father had taken twenty years earlier in the opposite direction en route to the United States—though he did not necessarily know it at the time—and dropped my things off in the stuffy little apartment I was able to book last minute in the outskirts of the city of Puebla. My mother had always said I could sleep in a matchbox as long as it was quiet.

"Tell them that your grandfather died by lightning strike. Everyone will know who Don Abram was when you tell them that his rifle burned its image on his backside," my mom said right before I boarded my plane. I walked into three small general stores, each selling the same candies and groceries as each other, and the three owners had said that they were not from the area and wouldn't know about any lightning-branded riflemen or walking flowers.

I walked into a small bakery where a large and tall man, dark in complexion like my mother and me, stood behind the counter bagging little *conchas* for the lady in front of me.

"We used to say he was related to those bastard weeds behind the giant wall that separated Don Arturo Cruz's plot from mine." He said it while he was picking his teeth.

I looked at the man like he'd spat on my food. I was happy I wasn't as white as some of my relatives because I felt my face boil, and I forgot the half-finished coffee that stained my breath with its strong flavor.

My next stop was an old and well-established bar that, according to my mother, had been opened during the Revolution by a friend of Trasvilla himself—though reports on the matter cannot possibly be corroborated. I had promised myself to not let this one get me so angry.

The bar owner was worse. "I heard once that your great-grandfather had run with one of mine under Trasvilla's army, but he died *way* before he could do anything for you." Her laugh echoed in the massive wooden hall that could fit all the town's working-age, and often did. "If you go ask the priest, he could dig up some parchment with chicken scratch for birth records. He once told me I was related to a very pious woman who gave for the shrine of St. Anthony!"

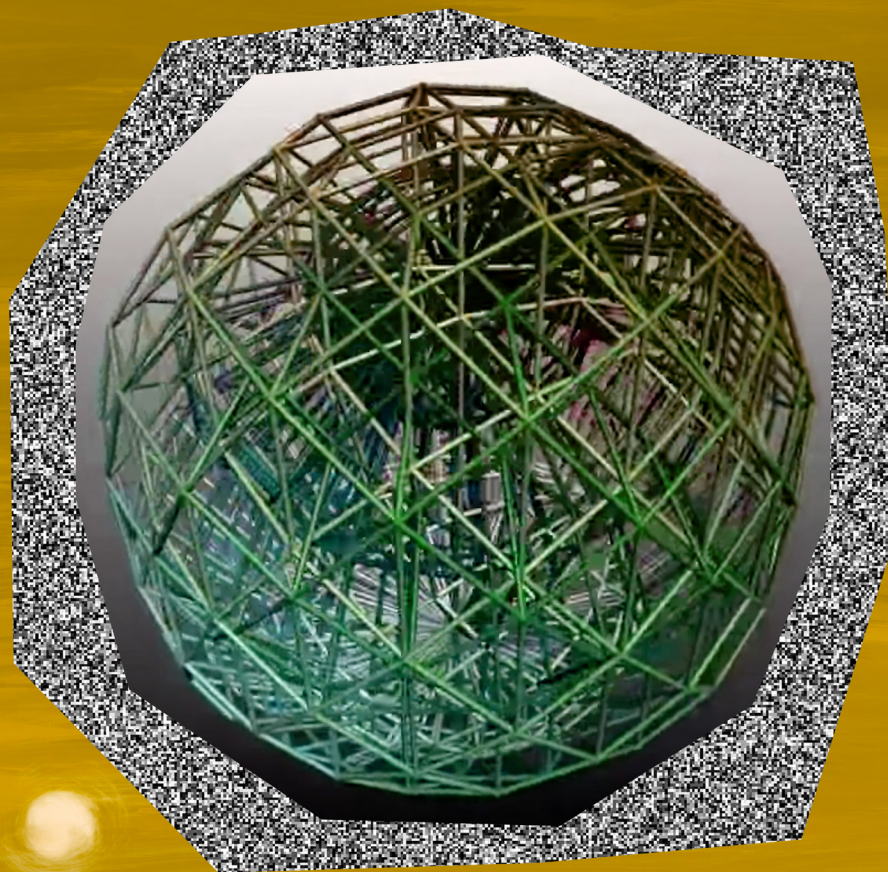
I worried that I would run into the same "no, we have as much of an idea as you do." Still, I made my way to the church, went through the motions of a good Catholic, and waited for Father Timoteo beneath the statue of St. Anthony holding the Infant Jesus.

"...Do you worry you come from nothing, like the rest of us?" He almost whispered, but I knew he'd spoken to me.

"I am angry that I could cure my familial amnesia and will fail, Father." I turned to him, a slender old man who'd long given up on raising his voice to show his disapproval.

"Come with me, son, and you will see." His steps were the loudest thing about him, and I could feel the lump in my throat ready to pop. He took me out of the church and walked me down a winding dirt road that fell off into the abyss on both sides. We walked and walked and walked and came upon a tree tightly strangled by metal fencing and yet tall as the David.

And without hearing what he was saying, I stared into the marred bark of the resilient tree and saw the faces of everyone I had seen in pictures: my aunt Loreta and uncle Pancho who'd sold their land; my cousin Pablo who'd gone missing; my mother, and sisters. We were all there and had been there for so long that it'd been forgotten. And we would be there forever.



REIFICATION: A QUESTION IN SERIAL

Esteban Sanchez | easanchez23@amherst.edu

1. I walk with you through a field of wild grass on a path laid out for us by others. Dandelion seeds float slowly, discernible against the blue sky, like white snowflakes that fall in other parts of the world. The field is lined with poplar trees. The type that grew by my home. I say that. "These poplar trees used to grow by my home." The sun is out. It asserts itself intermittently in between rolling clouds, dawn and dusk, the pouring rain, a strike of lightning. I have learned to rely on it, to step out when it comes. I hear the sound of warships' tattered flags flying in the wind of the marina. I hear the sound of poplar leaves rustling in the wind. I feel things immediately and all at once. I am surprised by their suddenness and their weight, like a sharp rebuke from an otherwise kind friend. I feel something in my hands and in my chest when you leave the room. I feel the same months later.

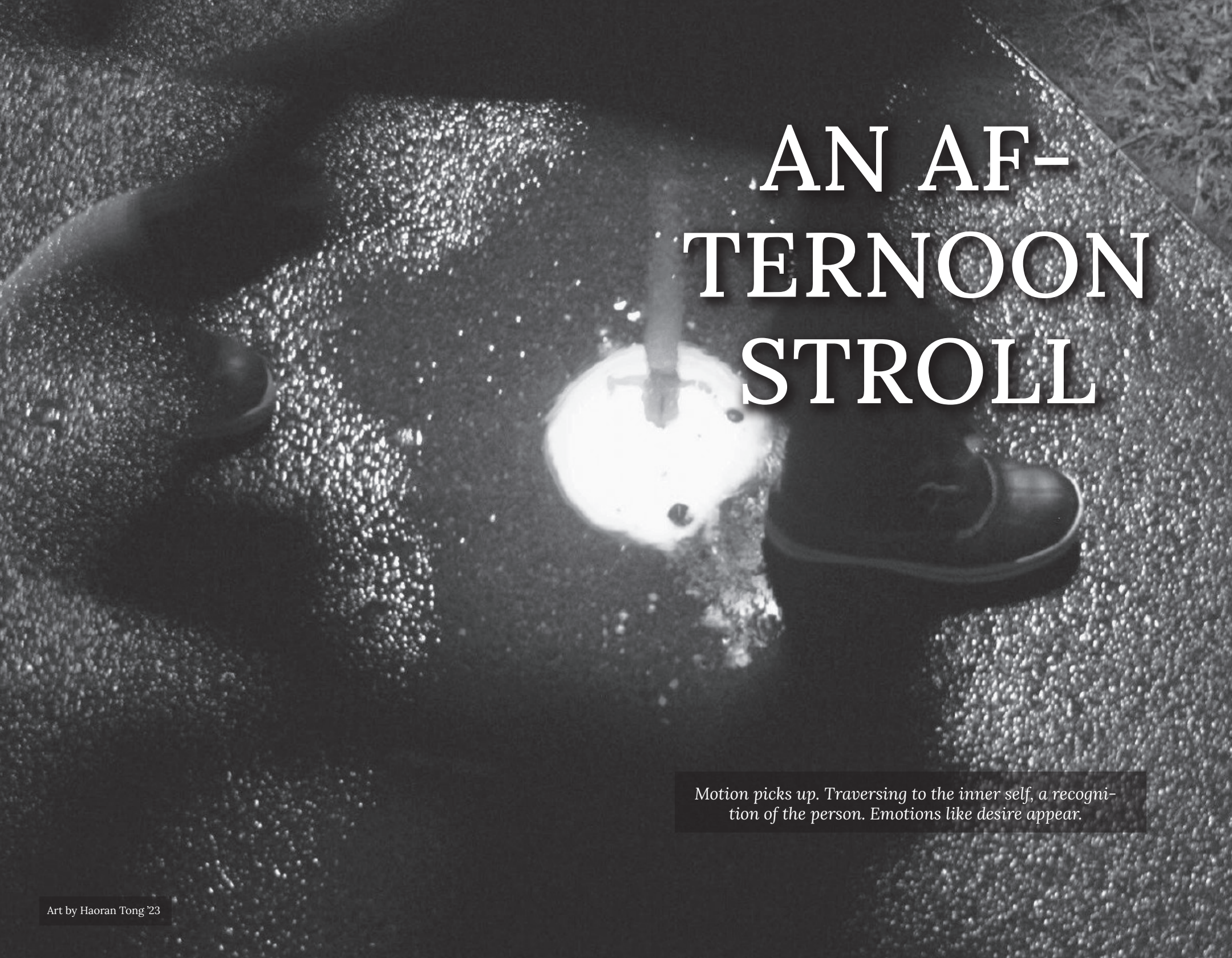
2. Will I ever be convinced? That I have the words to explain to my daughter the meaning of the salmon she points out near the river by our home? Salmon who come only as streaks of silver light, come and gone in an instant? How do I explain a form whose ontology is only the idea of a thing? Something that cannot be seen or known but only pointed to like a child who picks up a sand castle, turns around to their mother and says "look what I made" as the sand streams through their fingers? Is that what I mean? Or like a hummingbird held in the hand? Is that it?

3. Your hands are rougher than mine. In line at the cafe, I share with you my brief discovery. In response, you rub your thumb against my thumb because there is nothing left to be said. I can only draw attention to the soft reverberation of terrible echoes in the chest caused by the cool envy of hands which have known heavy things, which can promise and forgive, and have the prerogative not always to act but to lay calm, silent, like the sun resting atop blades of grass and the wings of sparrows. I glance out the window and become aware of the millions of atoms relentlessly circling one another, colliding with one another, tearing, shredding the very fabric of things. There is a structure to it all, one that I can give it and know by wanting. If I were to, as I sometimes do when you have fallen asleep in my arms and I must be still lest I wake you, hold it steady in my mind it all rushes away from me and I must reach out to you, grasp onto your hand, feel its angry calluses, and remember I

am only a visitor here. You tell me at night the white jasmine vine pushes through the air, shoves aside billions of atoms, twists and contorts itself, hoping it will find something to latch onto. I mean: at night I whisper your name hoping it will bring me to you.

4. When the moment ceases, I am reminded I have been born from white indifferent incandescence. I think my breath enough to disturb the eternal equilibrium of silent matter; that most waves crash silently and how the sun runs and hides amongst birchwood trees. I am a side-effect of a larger process of material waves, the bending of space-time, the calm, steady, indefatigable galloping of foam on the shore. Also, there is no truth. Is that true? From which justifications do I act? What promises are there? With what alacrity did I reproduce Cantor's argument? Or Gödel's sentence? What concern do I have for clever arguments? And with what egotism did they create facts, irrefutable, obstinate, and terrible? Why should I create? Why do I always want and want indiscriminately? Why do my wants feel like punishments? And why does the lack of want feel worse?

5. I fell asleep to the sound of pouring rain. I woke up to the same noise as if each drop of water landed on precisely the same spot, upon the same blades of grass, the same muddy footprints left behind by children running inside, the same space and the same emptiness. Maybe I cannot discern its difference or its empathy, so I am left only with the indubitable feeling of the redundancy of things. An unremarkable awareness that comes from the lifting of quiescence, an awareness that I have shared this moment with you before, that this is the moment I can share and these are the things I can feel. If it ceases, I cannot know of its cessation, only that you are not there and that the moment has nothing to latch onto. Which does not interrupt the brief ritual I allow myself when I am less brave, less awake, and less trusting. Today, the mountains, which usually sit a cliché purple against blue skies, ask me for penitence. My thoughts, and my words, which intervene habitually in experience, are nothing compared to the whispered prayers of rushing water, coursing down cutterpipes, through man-made streams, down the leaves of poplar trees, and across the orange helmets of construction workers directing traffic. It all ends, doesn't it, like the conjunction of matter, in violent insensitive waves, which I can say nothing of except that they come and go blue on white shores? But, they are not blue are they? Actually they are a torment of insidious colour, insensitive colour, incorrigible colour, colour that is not colour. I have lost you.



AN AFTERNOON STROLL

Motion picks up. Traversing to the inner self, a recognition of the person. Emotions like desire appear.

CONNECT

Grace Escoe | gescoe26@amherst.edu

Great Chasm
An inch filled with a single board
Yet still vast
Yet still devoid

Concrete
Loads of hardened gray
Pillars of stone
All to endeavor
To contain You

Separation a mere
Inconvenience for
Them
Insurmountable for
I

Yet still
Left with
Something *space* needed
To be filled

The whiplash
The whitewaters
The miss
The murk

Balance
On a string
Does not
Come easily

A volition
Two thoroughfares
That seem
To abstain

A step closer
And broadly secure
Nonetheless
Still only a step
Nonetheless
Still a great chasm

The entire stretch
Left only a fine line
Perilous path
The gap
Potentially filled
At the wager
Of abatement

Convention
Followed by another
Yet forever discontinuous
A divide

Dare I
Bound the stretch
Balance so precarious
A light wind
Not you
Catch me
But the Whole

There unapologetically
Un-truly-changed
With a question
Connect

FERRIED

Sonia Chajet Wides | schajetwides25@amherst.edu

When I was eleven, I started taking the subway alone; I learned what it meant to pick myself up and walk myself down as the train roared rickety. On the cross-borough ferry, it was all magnified, the holding of myself; high above the water, I was a traveler in my own city.

*

Ferry III – Manhattan to Governors Island (2019)

Alone on the upper deck, there were buildings I saw
that I would have pointed out to a companion, compacting
it back

into my own brain, that was fifteen and I was fifteen
and I could lift that word
like a big basket of tissue paper, fift-teen, don't you feel
How that word is full of air?

Alone, I wrote:

*ivy tumbled out of my lips today
that which I've saved, in cupped hands
thickness of being, I suppose*

*shortest ferry of all today,
in greenish water
not even moved long enough to make that rush
but the sun made it white*

*shaky on my legs, today.
shaky on my words
the ferry to the train*

**

When the ferry's motors churn the water, it removes specific location; looking down at the sparkling curtains of foam, it could be any water, anywhere. I felt the same effect from the pandemic, particular settings only accessible through glass, my gaze focused on this space of general pixelation. The empowerment of aloneness gave way to a self trapped behind isolation, and I wanted more.

When I was finally able to return to the specific location of high school, the subways were too crowded at morning rush hour—we took the ferry to school instead.

*

Ferries – Brooklyn to Manhattan, 2020 and 2021

By the pier, the silver fence looked like wool
We rode on the outside up top; looked up at the thick fog rolling
under the
bridge when it didn't hurt our eyes, that's a commute to
community

I was so close to the water, so far from it
so far from land, sev-en-teen spilling that
word is more of a decantation than a lift
condensation, respiration, search me while I wind that path by
the river
picking myself up and setting myself down



Art by Kyla Biscocho '25

SATURDAY MORNING RITUAL

Gaby Weaver | gweaver25@amherst.edu

As I lift my head from the crook of your neck, the soft lines of your face, the crumpled blanket, and the brick wall snap into focus. And there's nothing I can do to stop myself from breaking into a smile, planting a kiss on your forehead, and whispering, "I love you, I love you, I love you." You laugh, squeeze me tighter, and I melt back into the blankets, back into you.

Light banter characterizes our first conversation. I argue that we should spend the rest of our lives in this twin-size bed while you remind me of the pastries and live music that await us at the farmer's market.

You always have the upper hand. While you're alert from the moment you wake, tiredness wells under my eyes and seeps into my voice. So, of course, you sway me in the end (because I never would have given in otherwise...).

After a couple of "c'mon, c'mon"s, I toss the blanket aside and walk to my dresser. Pulling on sweaters, we step outside into the breeze. It takes me a moment to acclimate—the crisp air snaps me out of my lethargic state. I wrap my fingers around yours and quicken the pace.

We've stepped out of the campus bubble, immersing ourselves in the heart of the New England town. A circle of tents displaying soaps, baked goods, earrings, and other treats fill the lawn. I smile at Amy, the florist at Many Graces, where I bought you chrysanthemums a couple weeks ago. The sweet smell of cider draws my attention to the Park Hill Orchard stand. Your eyes are glued to the different apple varieties, meticulously inspecting each one. Honeycrisps, Empires, Baldwins, Galas. You drop my hand to feel for an apple, and I pop a sample slice in my mouth, awaiting your decision. With an Empire in one hand and Honeycrisp in the other, you turn to ask, "Which looks best?"

"What about getting both?" I suggest. Your eyes light up at the idea. What a luxury to get two farmer's market apples! I can't imagine spending my \$2.61 on anything else.

We take turns eating the Empire first, and the pause between bites allows its honey-sweet flavor to linger on my tongue. Nearing its end, I pop the core into my mouth. You try to persuade me of the imminent threat of arsenic poisoning, so I defiantly pull out my phone to search for counterarguments.

"For one, it's cyanide poisoning, NOT arsenic," I read, to which you respond with an eye roll.

"Because that's so much better," you remark sarcastically.

I continue, "According to Britannica, adults are only at risk of poisoning after consuming anywhere from 150 to several thousand apple seeds." I'm met with another eye roll, and you tell me I'm ridiculous. I just smile. I'm convinced I'm right this time around.

With our first apple (and core, in my case) filling our stomachs, we continue onto the bakery stand. Choosing between croissants, muffins, scones, and unidentifiable treats requires much contemplation. We decide on one sweet and one savory. Knowing your love for blueberries, the turnover is quickly selected, followed by a spinach and feta pastry.

We have one last stop: the perfect location for pastry consumption and front-row seats to the local guitarist—a picnic bench in the center of the green. There's always an old man singing folk songs. Some Simon and Garfunkel, Leonard Cohen. The kind of songs that make you feel like you're watching a slice-of-life film. The children with sticky paint-covered hands under the Mead Art Museum tent and an old couple with their newly purchased parsnips are the main characters. You and I are just passersby.

At the end of Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide," I am shaken from my daydreams. My hands delve into the pockets of my jeans, and I'm disappointed to find I have no cash for his tip jar. You silently press a five into my hand, and I approach just as "Bridge over Troubled Water" begins. *When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them*—a thank you interrupts the opening lines—*I'm on your side, oh*. And the song resumes, our fleeting interaction lost in the lyrics.

I return to sit beside you, running my fingertips along yours. "Should we get going?" you ask. I knew the question was coming, but I still can't shake my mild disappointment and anxiety that ensue. Returning means facing the 324 pages of reading I've fallen behind on, my book review, my problem sets...

As we leave the green, we break out the Honeycrisp apple, sharing it until we reach Spring Street. The remaining half is all yours. We part ways at the corner, you heading for Marsh Library and me walking toward Lipton. With Simon and Garfunkel lyrics cycling through my head, I make a mental note to wake up early Saturday mornings. Because as much as I love lounging in bed, nothing beats the farmer's market with you.

BRAID US

Awa Diop | adiop26@amherst.edu

The thick branch of the oak tree leans against the narrow second floor window and blocks streams of sunlight from *Adja's African Braiding Salon*. The light that seeps through the panes reaches the back of the shop, casting stark white rays against the pink wall. All the stations are empty this morning except for one.

Adja parts the last section of hair with the rattail comb to hook in another box braid. She's working on the last two braids of Michelle's hair, a first time customer. They haven't talked much past the initial greeting and Michelle explaining her style choice. Adja often prefers silence anyways. Having just come to Harlem from Mali some 6 months ago, she struggles to communicate comfortably with American clients like Michelle. She feels as though they have little in common. Embarrassed by her limited vocabulary and accented English, she's much less anxious when Sidiki Diabaté's *L'Enfant Beni* playing from the TV hooked to the right wall fills up the space.

As Adja separates the Expression braiding hair, she sees her daughter who sits behind her through the mirror. She brought Tima to the salon whenever she wasn't at Kindergarten. Babysitters were too expensive, and she never really felt safe leaving her baby with anyone but her mom and sisters who were now back home. Tima, who was previously laying on the rug watching some YouTube show on her tablet, was now sitting up with a doll in between her lap teaching Kayla, Michelle's daughter, how to braid. They both sat concentrated on the mannequin head, the youtube video now playing on the floor as their own background music. They had matching pink and blue bubbles at the end of their plaits. The little name necklace around Kayla's small neck mirrors the name bracelet on Tima's wrist.

Kayla intently watches as Tima's chubby, little fingers part a messy section of the doll's head. She then separates the section of hair into 3 parts. Tima holds out for Kayla's hand to gently place on one of the small sections of hair. As Tima holds her two pieces of hair apart from each other, she instructs Kayla to place the piece of hair she's holding through them. Tima roped her own two over Kayla's piece to make the first hetch of the plait.

"That's it! Now you move that," Tima instructs as she points.

Tima had picked up many words at school, and has been stringing together full sentences for the past couple weeks. The curvature of her tongue as she speaks is slightly laced with that of her mother's language and her English is quite impressive. Kayla circles around her still holding the piece of hair, moving to the direction she pointed to make another layer of the plait. The two girls keep moving around one another, their arms tangling up as they attempt to finish their first braid together. Once done, the plait hung loose and fuzzy. But it held up nonetheless, refusing to untangle.

Meanwhile, Adja asked Michelle, "You like?" Michelle nodded as they both looked into the mirror. "Yes, thank you." Their eyes trailed from Michelle's box braids to their little girls in the background. Through the glass, Kayla and Tima appeared as though they were reflections of their own mothers. The longer they stare, the more the little girls themselves were starting to look alike.

"You ready to go, Kayla?" Michelle asks as she hands Adja the folded cash and stands up. Kayla swiftly responds "Yes mommy," as she gets up and waves bye to Tima. "Can we stop by Amy Ruth?" Her mother agrees, as she grabs her hand and they make an exit out to the stairwell. On their way out, they walked past a delivery man from "L'Ambassade" bringing up jollof rice to the salon.

Adja tells Tima to go wash her hands to eat.

The mannequin falls off her lap as she gets up, the single braid sticking out. Despite their severing, Kayla and Tima are to be forever connected through that braid. Their handprints scatter across the plait, some overlapping another down the braid. For each hetch, their own bodies bended and conjoined. They braided their differences to cultivate.

They go on to live their lives, distance causing differences in their attitudes and maneuvers. As with their ancestors, they split into different cultures and worlds. Yet, they too remained binded with memories each might forget they even have.



Art by Steven Huang '24

A STRAND OF OPPORTUNITY

Tristan Moore | tmoore24@amherst.edu

“How do you think I got lice?”
 My client turns her head to an angle, eagerly awaiting a
 response
 I can't help but think, “How the hell would I know? I'm just here
 to get rid of it.”
 I clip a section of her hair up
 Revealing a louse scurrying through the trenches of dyed roots,
 What anxiety he must've felt,
 As he quietly buried himself.
 I quickly swipe a comb through
 Nothing.
 Frustrated yet admiring
 I wonder who is home that he dies to see
 To recount his near-death experience.
 Reconsidering the mother's question, maybe I had a guess.

“Well, I'd imagine it starts with your daughter's head
 two lice found each other, and called it love
 A love that got them 4 kids
 A modest number for lice
 As numbers grew, opportunity turned scarce
 The father louse, drunk on self-pity
 Home tensions turning fierce,

But, you suspected something crawling on your kid's head,
 So you douse the land on your daughter's scalp with pesticides,
 Poisoning a family's already precarious situation.
 Foreseeing a cruel future,
 Mother and daughter lice seek refuge in a new destination
 From an uninhabitable home.

At dark times of the night,
 Carefully picking the longest, gold strand of hair,
 Mother n' daughter trek a difficult path
 Pinchers grappling on to a dream they share,
 Uncertain if the child will shake
 Petrified they'll be separated if she awakes

Hopping from one strand to yours
 Only *one* departs
 Alone daughter, hopeful starts, no direction

It was you.
 It was you that caused this 14 inches of migration

And it was you they found at the end
 As you slept in your king bed with your daughter
 Gold retriever at your feet
 Your hair sprawled across the pillow
 Lice never migrate to a stranger on the street
 Their path has a familial follow
 A historical follow
 They cross a path you created
 So why does your mouth drop to see the cities they've built?
 Yet they exist to be hated
 Do you really not feel a speck of guilt?

A daughter creates a family on your land
 Lice crawl along your scalp
 Wiggle through a thick hair strand
 Create eggs of opportunity
 On the little hairs behind your ears
 Weaving complex networks in their community
 Withstanding shower pressure of poverty
 Living in constant fear of a random hair check
 Gifting red bite marks on the back of your neck
 Do you feel itchy yet?"

I,
 Son of an immigrant mother,
 Stand with metal comb in hand,
 Paid 15 per hour
 To search
 Catch
 Remove
 A daughter, mother, children
 Paid 15 per hour
 To meticulously comb out
 Cities
 Families
 Dreams
 From her golden, oily hair,
 Allowing only one mother n' daughter to reunite
 Paid 15 per hour
 To reassure myself,
 "Well, it's not my mother"
 "We aren't parasites; *they* are!"

The mother pulls her head away
 Insulted by my silence,
 She's visibly annoyed
 Her eyes tell me to respond.
 With my blue plastic gloves,
 I point to the daughter she loves
 "My best guess? It's probably just from her."

(NIGHT)BLIND

Tapti Sen | tsen25@amherst.edu

"রাতকানা" she calls them,
 the fools who would return home too late,
 trampling over paddy fields and marshy soil
 feet caked just enough to miss awaiting rough cement
 where they would stumble, fall sideways, into the awaiting
 trench

But wouldn't they see in the moonlight?
 Silly girl! They're রাতকানা! It's in the word itself,
 But why wouldn't they all walk back together? So no one would
 fall in?
 She shakes her head—you forget, in the old days, we ended with
 sundown.
 Most people left before the day grew dark
 My curious expression: "Except you?" Her cast aside smile.

"Look! There it is," she points out the window of the car.
 Staring dubiously, "that's not a bridge" for does a slab of cement,
 balanced precariously over two shorter slabs, deserve to be
 called anything?
 Nostalgia clear in her face, musingly, we slow down—
 Well, it has run—down a bit, of course, but haven't we all?

I stare back at those concrete slabs, out of place in the
 overwhelming greenscape
 and wonder—"What happened to the men who fell?"
 Some would make the journey back at dawn,
 after a good night's rest among the dewdrops and grass,
 others would be found by worried mothers and wives,
 and some—we used to say they were "lost to the night"

"Lost?" "They were never seen again."
 I dart another glance at that concrete slab,
 neck craning with a 12 year old's joyful morbidity,
 to see a rotting corpse—or at least weathered—down human
 remains!
 But alas—there was nothing so exciting in that gentle grass.

We used to run everytime we crossed that bridge to run home,
 she says,
 lest we get eaten by whatever remains. Or whoever.
 Why didn't you just take another path?
 "Where's the fun in that", she laughs—but,
 "Weren't you afraid?" She watches me,

Fondness evident in her gaze, "Every time."

I glance back at that bridge falling far behind us
and try to imagine that girl, twin braids bouncing,
mud-splattered frock, running barefoot over coarse cement,
friends and cousins egging her on, and that smile—
that eager youth freezes in time, in my mind for
an instant, and vanishes, shifts, brains to bun, skirt to sari
into an older frame, warmer and wearier, a woman that I
know all too well, or think I know, or wish I knew.

"Feel like reliving childhood memories?"
Voice catching, yearning unsaid: please tell me more,
I want to know you, as you are now, as you were then—
My mother shakes her head, "I'm probably রাতকানা too now."



Art by Alma Clark '25

PERFECT AND YELLOW-STARRED

Sofia Tennent | ttennent25@amherst.edu

Lydia pauses before getting out of the car, her eyes tracing her small home in the harsh afternoon light. The lavender and rosemary and basil bushes are larger than when she last spent time observing them. A headache threatens her temples as she questions yet again what might make this home look right for a family.

Before Lydia can collect herself, her phone breaks the silence, rattling the interior of her purse. The sound tempts the pain in her forehead, but she puts a plastic smile on her lips as she answers. (Her mom says a smile can always be felt, if not heard, through the phone).

"Hey babe, I can't talk long."

At the sound of Kara's voice, the muscles in Lydia's face relax. The muscles in her shoulders relax. Lydia starts collecting her things from the car, tugging her purse from the passenger seat.

"I just got a notification that my package was delivered to your house," she hears Kara say, "Do you see it?"

The purse that Lydia has started to lift falls back.

"My package?" Lydia asks, "But you said it was gonna be a few more days before you could—"

"I found the time! Can you tell me if it was delivered though? I just don't trust—"

Lydia cranes her neck, and seeing a slightly smushed cardboard box, says, "Yes! I mean, I see it, it's here."

"Oh, that's so good, I'm so glad," Kara says, sounding breathless, "I really have to go now, but I'm happy I could get this to you."

Seconds later, Kara has been returned to her patients and Lydia is walking up to her porch. Lydia's mind is trained on Kara's package, but she makes herself stoop and pull up 15 weeds before succumbing to her goal.

Inside, Lydia dumps her backpack and purse and coat and turns towards the box with full attention. In it she finds a fleece blanket (perfect, periwinkle and yellow-starred, just as pictured)

along with a note from her lovely Kara. How lucky she is to have a Kara in her life.

So happy I could make this for you and baby. I know you'll be the best mother. xoxo Kara.

Lydia's chest tightens as she holds the paper. "The best mother." She can no longer help wincing at this obvious compliment, so common and so evil. Fuck that impossibility. She drops the note in her kitchen trash can.

Lydia's most recent flight home had been scheduled well in advance, but happened to fall just six days after Lydia learned she was pregnant.

In those nights before her plane ride, she had replayed and replayed the reaction her mother would have when hearing the news. Lydia had pictured telling her while sitting on her childhood bed, on a perfect fleece periwinkle and yellow-starred blanket, holding her mother's hand.

In those first few days, her elation was palpable—a thing that filled every room she entered and person she encountered. By the end of that flight she'd received four stroller recommendations, as well as two Venmos from strangers who wanted to help her buy diapers.

Her brother had picked her up from the airport.

"I think you'll be really happy with what I've done to mom's house," he said at some point on the ride home. Lydia shifted in her seat. Her brother had been thinking about ways to tear apart and fix-up their childhood home from the hour Lydia left for school.

"My room? Did you do anything to the yellow room?" Lydia asked.

Of course he had. He reassured her that there were pictures of it saved in a scrapbook, that the room mostly looked the same, that "like...the walls are in the same place."

Lydia couldn't look at her brother. Her body stayed crumpled, turned away from him, until they reached the house—until Lydia got inside, set down her things and fell into the couch next to her mother.

Even from the couch, through an open door down the hall, Lydia could see a wall of her childhood bedroom. It was barren, painted an inoffensive renter-friendly gray, and it was angry. The wall, clearly, was angry to have all of the meaning stripped out of it. Lydia wanted to scream at her brother in that moment. But if she started screaming it would never stop. He saw so little value in the most important things, in the memories preserved by those yellow walls, and the once-blue walls down the hall. Nothing could bridge that essential difference between them, she thought.

So instead of screaming, Lydia turned toward her mother. Lydia smoothed and tucked her hair behind her ears. She put her hands behind her back.

"Mom, I am going to have a baby—a baby girl," Lydia said.

She saw her mom's face open into the most beautiful smile. That smile was everything that Lydia had pictured, but tears started to flow from Lydia's eyes because she was not finished.

"Lydia—what!" her mom said, looking frozen in place, "Lyd, I'm so happy, I didn't think you wanted, or, I didn't think this would—"

"Mom," Lydia interrupts, her voice somehow staying calm (nearly monotone), "I am going to have a baby girl, and I really want everything that used to be in my bedroom," she said.

"Lydia," her mom paused for a long time, looking frozen again, this time also pained. She looked up at Lydia's brother. "Lydia, I am so excited for you, I am so happy, but I think we got rid of those things. Hun, but please don't cry, there is no reason to cry, love, there is no reason."

"Mom, I need my things, I need the blanket you made me." Lydia turned to her brother. "I need my things, my books, my daughter needs the books and my bed, she needs it, did you at least save my blanket? I can't do this without it, I won't be able to do this," Lydia said, her voice trailing slowly off as tears overwhelmed her. She could feel herself folding in, and this reaction was somehow unfair, but she wanted no pity. She wanted her anger in this moment.

So she had left.

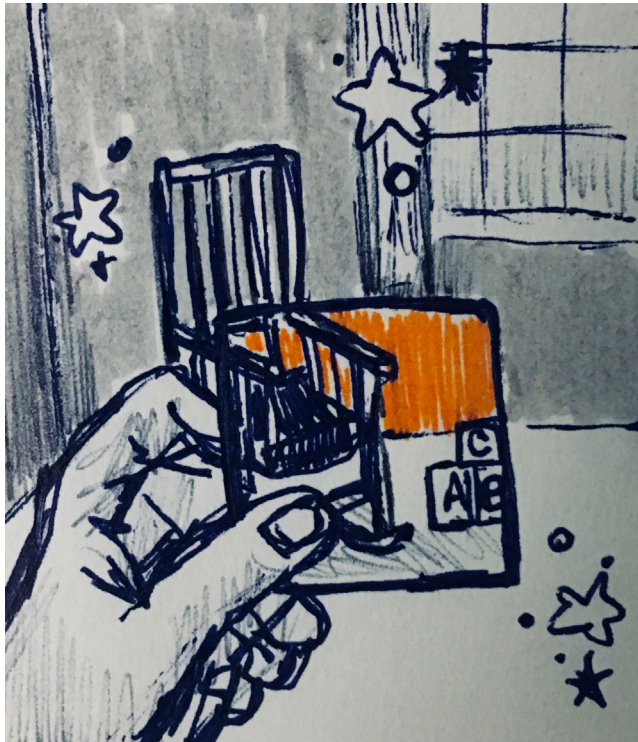
Kara, who never moved out of her home (who got to keep her and Lydia's perfect childhood close), picked Lydia up.

When Lydia got on her flight home a week later, the only thing from home she took was a picture of herself and Kara as toddlers playing in Lydia's yellow nursery. In the picture, Lydia sits on a fleece blanket (periwinkle and yellow-starred).

And now she holds that photo in one hand, Kara's blanket in the other, as she walks into the nursery. In the photo, a blanket is hung in loose folds over the corner of a brown rocking chair Lydia's mom used to nurse in. Lydia walks over to an identical rocking chair and hangs Kara's identical blanket—letting the folds fall loosely over the left corner of the chair.

Now, she lets herself fall into the chair. She pulls out her phone and starts a new message to Kara:

The blanket is perfect, thank you so much.



Art by Amy Zheng '26

DEAD ON ARRIVAL

M. Lawson | mlawson25@amherst.edu

There was a sale at Ace Hardware today: forty percent off washers, so Ophelia walked home with tiny metal discs pinging around in his coat pocket. He didn't have any particular use for them right now, but soon enough, he'd be stumped and a washer would sew it all together. How horrible it would be to be so close in the middle of the night and have to quit right before success, just because he'd passed up a sale.

When Ophelia got home he stuffed the bag of washers in one of his dresser drawers beside a good chunk of his savings, transformed into hardware and other essentials. He heated up a frozen lasagna. There was no dinner table, so he sat on his floor watching a show on his phone and glanced over at the machine in his bedroom corner. He thought: *Tonight it will work*. He had thought this every night for the last decade. He kept eating.

Old SNL clips weren't distracting enough, Dana Carvey sketches holding his attention for less than a minute. The other day he'd read an article about how people his age were so used to instant gratification that they couldn't focus on anything. Of course he could focus. What was the portal, the pride of his life, if not driven by focus? But—

maybe he really wasn't all that focused.

Maybe if he'd spent more time watching over the portal, instead of working and reading and texting friends, it would work. He abandoned his lasagna and leaned over to fiddle with it, though the sun was still watching.

During the day Ophelia admonished himself for drawing circuit diagrams in the margins of meeting notes, and by night he kneeled before the metal shrine he'd been dragging around since high school. He hated it. It drove away the few visitors he had, the portal too obviously ugly to be cited as an art project. If he got it right, though, its appearance wouldn't matter. He wouldn't cry about a dent in the frame, nor about a ten-year-old frayed wire. He would never think about it again.

He wrapped a copper wire around the base of the portal. His grandfather had been an electrician; Ophelia hadn't ever even taken a trade class. He had done this for so long, though, that he figured he had to get it right one day. It was a fire hazard, one that would surely get him evicted if his landlord ever came

in and saw it. The exposed wires were thrown over the metal base, barely hanging on. It wouldn't catch fire. Would it be stupid enough to kill its creator? Or—

maybe the fire was the key. Maybe it would scrape the years off his bones, return his few gray hairs to the universe. It would clean him, absolve him, and turn him back, so this time, he could get everything right.

He would open a portal to another world, one where he didn't have to cycle through roommates because they all kept getting married, where he didn't carry around a name that made him sound less like a Shakespearean tragedy and more like a man who was couldn't come up with something different when he transitioned. His creation was the only route to fixing his life.

He nourished it in hopes of it growing strong and making him proud. He was a horrible father. He stroked its metal casing and adjusted a wire, like tucking the hair behind a child's ear. He was a fantastic father. What life would it have without him?

"How are you feeling?" he asked. "Anxious? Happy? Don't you want to tell me what's going on?"

It didn't answer. He had an art history degree; maybe his friends, almost medical doctors now, could coax it from its catatonic state, but the creature in his room recalled the work of an artist Ophelia couldn't remember. He could've written a paper about it.

"Hello? Are you going to speak today?"

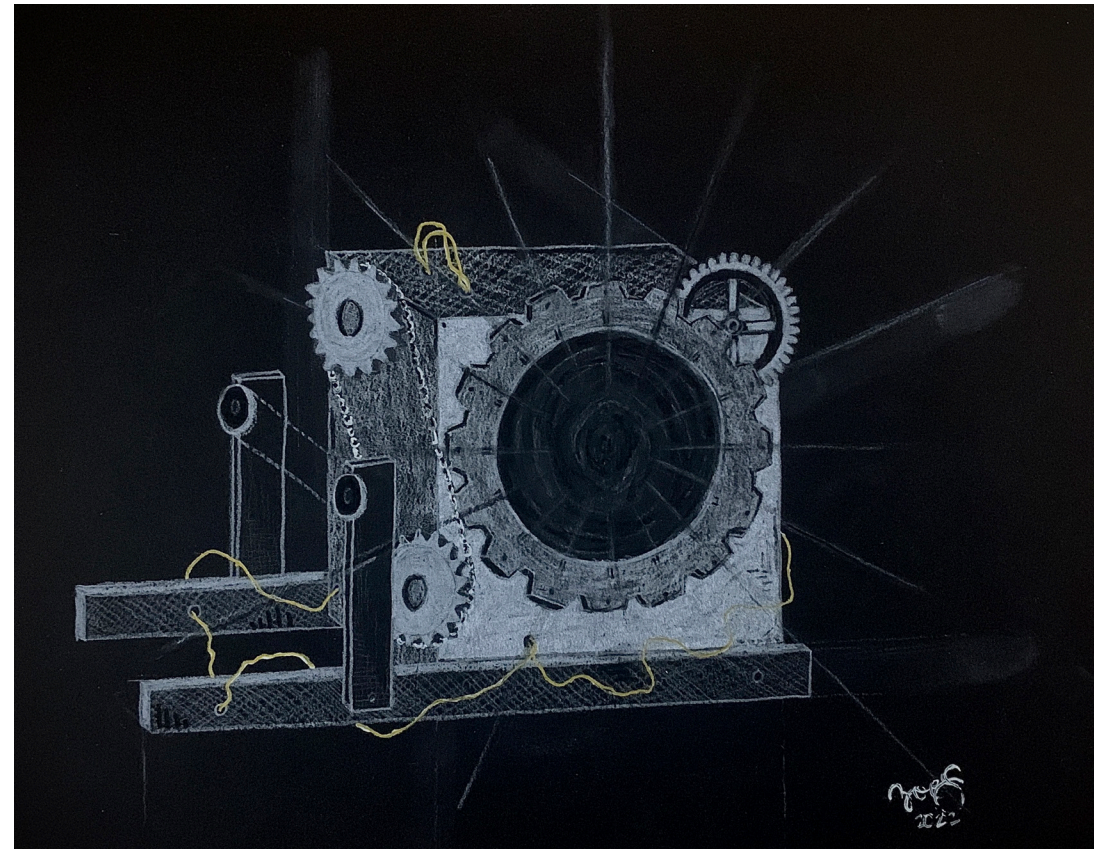
The child stayed silent. Petulant, ungrateful child.

"What if I do this?" Ophelia adjusted the base and leaned up to catch the frame from falling.

No response. He thought about teaching it a lesson by hauling it down to the scrapyard and threatening to leave it there unless it acted right. Then: he would leave it, turn back to see his only child crashed in a trash incinerator, melted down for scrap parts, and become a new man. He would grieve. He would join a Dungeons and Dragons campaign, or maybe volunteer at a food shelter. He would notice when the sun set and when the day ended. Or—

maybe he was nothing without it.

Ophelia tucked it in, leaving it upright enough only for ease of use later, and laid himself down to sleep. Tomorrow—no, today, after a thousand work emails and a reheated lasagna—he would really breathe life into it.



Art by Zoe Strothkamp '24

BLUESHIFT

Jackeline Fernandes | jfernandes24@@amherst.edu

I'd like to imagine my mother spiraling in space, a constellation of the galaxy Andromeda, blueshifted, moving against the force of time, that force which causes the expansion of the universe. I can see the both of us: knees deep in the Long Island Sound, our toes encased by the sand that grounds us while the gentle waves lap at our thighs, swaying us rightward, teasingly threatening to knock us over into the water, to look anywhere else from where we're looking but we look anyway at the dazzling New York City skyline. I feel my eyes holding its distant light, her gaze parallel to mine, the weight of my awareness of such closeness in the shared direction of our vision. *How lovely.* Her words lightly puncture the enveloping darkness. *How lovely the light, how lovely, if only there were a bridge from here to there.* Glass, shattering glass: I turn, I stare at the bright, twinkling stars of reflected citylight falling from her glass eyes, *if only.* Glass, shards of glass project the image of my father into my eyes—he's wearing flannel pajamas, sleeping in a separate bed; he's firing up the molding machine, grease blackening his sleeves; he's pulling into the driveway, a smile visible through the Jeep's front window; he's kissing her, her baby bump grazing his belly—I stare, stare as her eyes and my father continue to shatter simultaneously, the shards falling into the water below. I want to bend forward and scoop up the shards, to be a sculptor that will cement them together into those two sparkling orbs, but my body is stuck, fixed in space. She kneels and picks up the pieces, one by one, and I stare as her fingers bleed, reddened with small cuts, cementing them back together into prisms, and a beam of white light is thrown across the Sound, passing through the prisms, through her, producing a spectrum of red and orange and yellow and green and blue and purple that make up her hidden radiant energy, the aura of her presence ever since she surrendered herself to redshift, propelled forward into the future by the natural laws of time, refusing to resist any longer. I shout in space from my fixed position but she once told me that there is no sound in space, she cannot hear me, she moves forward without me, my father, too, expanding with the universe in the opposite direction, and I feel as though I am the sole thing bridging them together as my mother turns to wave goodbye, looking into my eyes to look at him.



BRIDGING WORLDS

Break into fantasy and sci-fi themes. All of these pieces have either a fantastical element or a magical one

SKIES BEYOND SKIES

Pauline Bissell | pbissell25@amherst.edu

1.
That was the week the grapes were swelling and bruising
Purple, dust-seasoned. Again
We filled our pockets until the grapes, sun-burnt
And sun-ripened, burst
Like blood vessels and left wine-dark
Stains running down to our ankles.
Looking down, you said we should play
Pretend that we were cracked open,
Like so many barrel-chested
Oaks, hollowed out clean from
Summer lightning storms and I
Said nothing,
Just picked another handful of
Tender-skinned fruits and let them
Dissolve red against my puffed-out cheeks,
Dissolve into a heap of seeds.

2.
Then it was when you traced
The plane tails cutting slash marks
Through the pale morning sky, and you imagined
Aloud that those long, feathered lines
They leave behind are fraying seams
For some colossal fingers to grip
The edges of
And tear open and reveal,
Behind this one,
Another distant sky.

No, you were sure,
Beyond this world, this sky,
The only thing waiting for us
Was a duplicate.

3.
Then there were so many
Hours you saw only
The bulbous veins
In the ivy leaves, the
Straw-colored, straw-boned
Kicked-in sunflower
Heads littering the sidewalks
In an explosion of brown and white

Striped seeds and shriveled petals.
There was nothing
Left on the vine, nothing left
To invent, nothing
To make peace with
Anymore.

There were clouds that
Crumpled and folded over each other and sagged
Across the sun, there were
Clouds that hung soft and alone,
And, with you, there were skies beyond skies
And nothing beyond that



Art by Isabella Fuster-Crichfield '26

CROSSING INTO MINDS

Carolyn Thomas | cthomas23@amherst.edu

Henry was an ordinary eleven-year-old boy. He was quiet but sweet and kind to everyone. All his school friends knew Henry was a loyal friend who would never gossip or say anything negative behind their backs. Since Henry was a quiet child, his parents always assumed everything was fine. They never saw Henry express anger or frustration at anyone or anything. Henry's mom Rebecca bragged that Henry was the perfect baby. He slept through the night, and in the daytime he was brought home from the hospital and never fussed.

One Tuesday morning, Henry woke up to the sound of his mother's screams. He ran downstairs to the kitchen only to see his mother stirring her daily cup of hot water mixed with honey and lemon. But tears fell down her face and even though her mouth wasn't open, Henry still heard his mother's voice in the ugliest most peculiar way possible shout "I hate him! I want to kill him. I hope that bastard dies in his sleep." Henry shuddered in fear. He'd never heard his mother's voice sound so angry or experienced anything like this before.

"What's wrong? Did you have a nightmare last night?" Henry's mother asked stroking his hair. The other voice suddenly stopped.

"No. No nightmares. Everything's okay now."

"Thanks bud. Can you put the plate on the table for me. Your sleazy father can't help for anything."

Henry grabbed the dishes from the cabinet and walked to the dining room where his father sat at one end with his nose deep in the city's paper. His sister Lucy sat in her high chair at the other end playing with her fingers. As Henry leaned in to give his father a plate he heard in another ugly voice that he barely recognized as his fathers,

"That's it. That's why I'm leaving. How am I supposed to be the one who puts dinner on the table and still get called sleazy. Sheri knows my worth. She would never call me that."

"Who's Sheri?" Henry asked without thinking.

"Who's who?" His father said looking shocked.

"Nothing. I didn't say anything."

Henry's father diverted his eyes back to the newspaper and Henry heard his father say "I didn't say anything out loud. Did I? I need to start being more careful around the kids. Their mother would kill me if I told them before the papers were finalized." Henry thought, "What papers." Then he heard his sister in a sweet kind voice babbling the ABC's. He held on to the sound of her voice until his mom yelled that the bus was outside. The ride to school was horrid. He listened to fifteen minutes straight of Sally crying "Why wasn't I invited to Maggie's birthday party when I invited her to mine." Then he heard Maggie whisper, "I want Sally to come but my mom doesn't allow Blacks over the house." Then he heard Allen stress "If I don't get an 99 on this next paper my grade will be demoted from an A plus to an A. If that happens I am never getting into Harvard." After that Henry focused on Driver Mike's hum to a rock song he didn't know until the bus finally arrived at school.

First period was a disaster. The teacher instructed the class to do a five minute free write on "What came first? The chicken or the egg?" The constant movements of thought clashed and weaved inside Henry's head. He put his hands on his ears and screamed "Shut up! Everyone please stop talking. I cannot take anymore of it." The class and the teacher looked up very perplexed. This was a silent free write and no one was talking. Henry realized his mistake and said, "I'm sorry. I have a migraine and need to go home." The teacher took him to the nurse's office at once and when his mom came to pick him up she could hear her yelling,

"Today of all day's the kid calls out sick. I can't catch a break."

"I'm sorry mom."

"Sweetie you have nothing to be sorry about."

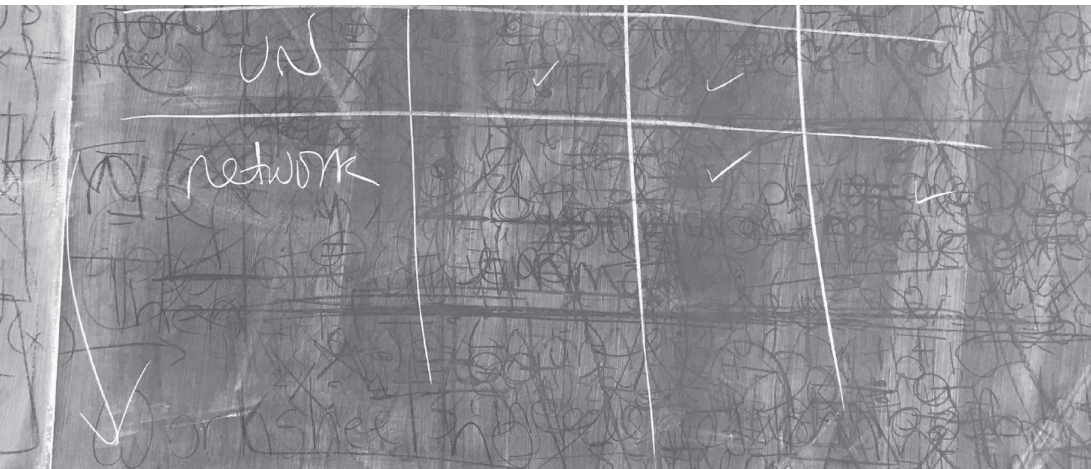
The ride home was mostly quiet except for his mother's random thought "I want him out tonight. I can't keep hiding it from the kids. It's eating Henry alive. The little boy never acts out in school. He's never even sick." When his father arrived home from work his mother said "We're doing this now. No more dancing around the truth."

"Son, your mother and I are going to start living apart. We don't love each other but that doesn't change the love we have for you and Lucy."

"I know. You're getting a divorce." Henry said.

"We are." Henry's mother said and he heard a small whisper "It's like he already knew. I guess he sensed it."

"I didn't sense it mom. I hear you and I hear everything. Good luck keeping secrets now." Henry thought and wanted to say but he let the words stay trapped in his mind. He promised himself to never to tell anyone about his new ability. "I'm a freak" he thought, and let the word bounce and ricochet against the sides of his mind. With each second, the echoing vibrations became even more intense. He held the secret inside himself and promised not to tell anyone. Not ever. Henry never wanted superpowers. He was happy with his ordinary life and hated the disruptions. But he accepted that the universe had chosen him and that it was his duty to carry the weight.



Art by Haoran Tong '23

COMBUSTIBLE POTIONS

Annika Bajaj | abajaj25@amherst.edu

We met that night on a drawbridge, in the rain, sprinting in opposite directions: you with golden hair plastered to your face, tangling up in long eyelashes your mother likes to call 'ladylike' and you tend to label as 'inconvenient'. Your heels had been kicked off before you'd even started running, down into the darkness of the river waters that protected your castle and the alleged crocodiles they contained. During processions when you were younger, you would drift toward the low barrier on either side of the bridge to search for their reptilian forms slipping into the water, until your mother would drag you back into the center. On this day, you were in a hurry, but you still swerved towards the edge to steal a glance: a kleptomaniac like me.

We almost collided thanks to the inertia of your dress and the layers upon layers of jewels on your neck. Neither of us tried to get out of the way, although, to be fair, we were both in a bit of a difficult situation. The soldiers on my tail marched steadily onward at a pace my ego could only hope to match—it turns out that they don't take kindly to having their weapons stores broken into for potion ingredients. They'd let me off with a warning last time, and I promptly forgot it. You know how unreliable my memory is. But nonetheless, I recall the first sentence I ever said to you word for word.

"Where the fuck are you going, princess?"

You, folds of fabric clutched in sloppy grips, made the most of the fact that the guards on your end hadn't yet realized that their princess was a runaway. Months later, you whispered to me that on nights when your mother's voice pierced your eardrums, you dreamed of making this run. You imagined that when you came back she'd put away her scepter for a moment and run to you, and maybe there would be relief in her eyes when she hugged you. Eventually you stopped imagining and learned to act the part—stay in a straight line.

Throughout our years together, I never stopped marveling at how neutral you can make your expression, no matter how wild your situation or how disheveled your appearance. Weighed down by layers of sodden skirts, makeup leagues away from your mother's portrait-ready standards, and still your eyes blank as a fresh-cleaned cauldron.

"You would do well to address me in a manner befitting your position... witch."

You only ever called me that once, but every time you sneak into my dreams I hear the little click of the t that your accent emphasized, like a stab. I like to think that you felt an instant connection, the way I did. As our pursuers (the ones that hoped to put us behind our respective bars, in our proper places) approached us on that rickety bridge, I heard the sharp echo of that *witch* and felt a twin flame catch.

In a way, I was your prince that day. The dragon of that castle had curled its claws around you, and I burst in, swordless and armored with years of fury, brandishing a broomstick and an unfortunate affinity for kleptomaniac spellcasting, and swept you off your feet. I would say that my charm freed us from our predicament, but I know that really your princess poise (those clean, cauldron-black eyes) saved us as you walked me back through the aisle of pitchforked hands and stares of frustrated violence. Those three words in your authoritative voice, the last time you ever used it, "*she's with me*"—their hands trembling with the effort of holding themselves back, stayed by your power.

You and your crown, staying a thousand pitchforks, dousing a thousand torches. We could still see the rising sun's flame as we chased the path of the water towards the woods. "*Another day, another royal guard chase*," I joked—you chuckled, and then you snorted and laughed and fell to the ground in a heap of trembling tears. I let myself join you there on the ground as you sobbed, and my heart leapt at the joy of the sound, like the first chirp of a chick poking its head out of the eggshell. My powers don't usually extend to magical force fields, so I relished this little bubble we'd created, before the "escaped-princess" alarm could sound and we'd have to run once again. I remember you there when I feel that familiar ache beneath my ribs—in that shining moment, the first time I'd taken a real, full breath in years, gasping for air that tasted sweeter for the effort.

No matter how many times I complained, later, about how you're all too used to getting what you want, I can't deny my complicity. By the time the sky had darkened enough to see stars, we'd reached far enough into the woods that we could rest our aching legs. You gave me a pitiful glance as we sat, hands just touching, on an overturned log surrounded by tall trees and moon-speckled moss. *I don't know where I'll sleep tonight*, you began to say, before I offered up the spare bedroom of my cabin in clumsy, stumbling half-sentences. *A temporary*

living situation, I said, until you can find work or lodgings in the town.

Not so temporary, it turned out. The first few nights, you couldn't sleep from the bugs and the rough mattress, and I called you charming over the smoke of the hodge-podge mushroom soup I'd pieced together from my depleted stores. You rolled your eyes at me and said, *I've heard that before*. You snorted at the way I squatted on the ground by the cauldron to stir the soup with both hands. *This isn't as easy as it looks*, I shot through gritted teeth, and you snatched the ladle with one hand and proved me wrong.

After those first few weeks we didn't get around to sleeping much. We'd wake, first in our separate beds and later (for convenience) tangled in my second-floor bedroom, talk from morning to night as I brewed and sold my potions and you explored the cabin, learning all of the corners of the stacked drawers and cabinets like your own castle bedroom, and chopping vegetables with slow, careful hands. Dipping our toes into the stream behind the cabin we would laugh until our chests ached, sun sparkling on the dew.

But one clouded morning, I laughed too hard, too long. I couldn't grab your arm in time. Not before you grasped your crown by the largest jewel and threw it headfirst into the swirling water. As you turned back to me, eyes shining, looking inches taller from the lift of the weight from your head, you couldn't see the question that weighed on my chest. I should have asked, then.

How could you give it up?

I know why, in theory. Rationally, I can see that the kind of freedom that comes with a kingdom's wars and petty worries on your shoulders doesn't have the same appeal, not when you've never had a taste of anything else. But when you threw that crown into the water, the shimmer of royal diamonds disappearing into the crowds of water droplets, like you always wanted, all I could think was: *I could've bought a new broomstick with that money*.

Maybe that was when we started to fall apart. Not when I spent hours locked in our room, head in my hands, curled up on the bed, after I spilled an entire cabinet of potions—a stupid, stupid, clumsy accident. You couldn't understand why I couldn't go down and face the shouting customers at the door or my reflection in the store windows. *It's not a big deal*, you cajoled,

you'll just buy some more and delay their orders, and it'll all be fine. When I shrugged your hand off my shoulder, you frowned and stepped back, as if I owed you something for your efforts to console me. I don't think you even hesitated before slamming the door on your way out.

Nor was it all the times you poked fun a little too deep, and I cut back a little too harsh, and we both yelled and bled and hid and scarred over until the morning, when we could look each other in the eye again. Not when we scavenged for our dinners and you no longer found it quaint that I couldn't buy enough bread to feed us for the week, and I no longer felt charmed by your poised posture and snarky comments about how my mattress was a little too solid for your tastes.

It started then, our stockings damp and faces flushed, two eyes shining and two held carefully blank (a skill I learned from you). Your head bare and hands empty like mine.

I like to think that you knew where the drawbridge would lead you when you set out into that rainy night, hell-bent on freedom—that you knew that my distant corner of hell had once again bet on freedom too. I like to think that we held our spark in check for even a moment before it caught on the flimsy unpolished shelves and combustible potions in my hut, the ones you knocked over first by accident and later just to watch them react. I like to imagine you didn't have to run away in the dark, that night you packed your bags and I told you, *you'll never make it*, the night I underestimated you for the last time. I like to think that we could have made it work, if we'd been a little kinder.

As you know, I like to imagine a lot of things. You once loved me for it, until the love curdled from the heat.



Art by Evelyn Chi '25

WELCOME TO EARTH

Davis Rennella | drennella24@amherst.edu

Two years. Two years many billions of miles away from his home planet. For this solitary space traveler, what had started as a bold expedition to new horizons for his people had become a disorienting journey through a galaxy that was hardly the unexplored frontier he had been taught to expect. Now, with his ship damaged, his crewmate lost, his mission long abandoned, he was closing in on a distant blue planet, with the idle hope of finding somewhere to rest for a while. On final approach, he discovered that it was home to a people who had built a proper landing site for craft such as his. A spacefaring people.

The roar of the engines faded as the craft came to rest on the landing pad. He opened the door to a blinding blue sky. Three figures approached him—an older woman with long brown hair, with a man on either side. She asked him his name—no one had addressed him by name in a long time—and he told her. Lief. The woman had only just finished telling him her name, Leila, before Lief stumbled and fell, being caught by one of the men. He hadn't realized how weak he had become after months in microgravity conditions. They carried him away to a medical center, where he passed out on a soft white bed.

For the next week, a curious Leila kept watch over this extraterrestrial visitor while he regained his strength. She then offered to take him to what she called the Celestial Sphere. It was at the heart of the facility, past rows of hangars and research centers. In the distance there was a massive spire stretching towards the sky, anchored to the ground with what looked like a massive gun barrel. They called it the Lance, a machine which could launch ships into space at incredible speeds, allowing unprecedented distances to be covered across the galaxy. It loomed like a giant, its apex just piercing the clouds on this gray and windy day.

They stepped inside the Celestial Sphere, and Lief was met with what looked exactly like a sky filled with stars. There were catwalks spanning across the room, and two people in uniform stood near one corner of the dome, taking notes. A ring-shaped platform stretched around its equator.

"This room contains all our observations of the universe as we know it," Leila explained. "We have records of all the expeditions which have left from Earth, which go back as far as 30,000 years. Some have produced settlements that we still hear back from sometimes. There's also the occasional reading of a ship

that has gone from a planet settled through a Lance jump to another world. That only happens once or twice a century, as far as we know." She glanced at Lief pointedly.

"Most unusual of all is when a ship actually returns back to Earth from another star system. Not only is getting back immensely difficult, but there isn't much reason to do so. We created the Lance for those who wish to explore the universe, and we've already explored our planet many times over."

She seemed to be opening a door for Lief to tell his story.

"I didn't know about any of this until I arrived—I always thought that my planet was the origin point of humanity in our galaxy. I'm just confused why I didn't know anyone else existed."

"How about this: you can find your home planet in the Sphere, and we'll see when it was first settled. There have been instances where we made contact with ancient settlements who had forgotten their origins, and made it part of their religion or folklore instead."

"Oh, well we don't have any origin stories like that, as far as I know. We never studied our history that much, honestly."

Leila had Lief stand on a circular platform at the center of the Sphere and point to the region of the sky where he resided. As he gestured, the entire virtual sky shifted with dizzying speed, as if their point of observation suddenly had moved hundreds of light years away. It took only a few more adjustments to find his star system, and finally his home planet.

Leila looked on in disbelief. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

"Of course! I've been looking back on my home planet in the sky every day for the past two years."

"No, I believe you, it's just—no one's ever been there before. Yet here you are." Leila asked Lief to guide her, using the Celestial Sphere, to each of the planets he had visited on his way to Earth. He told her stories from each one, and the data lined up with what Lief described. Leila listened with fascination.

"Could it be possible that there were explorers that preceded your people?" Lief asked.

"I just don't know. It doesn't make sense... before the Lance we didn't have anything that could have gotten anywhere close to

this system. It took us a very long time to be able to explore the galaxy. That has been our dream, ever since we survived the Great Burning.”

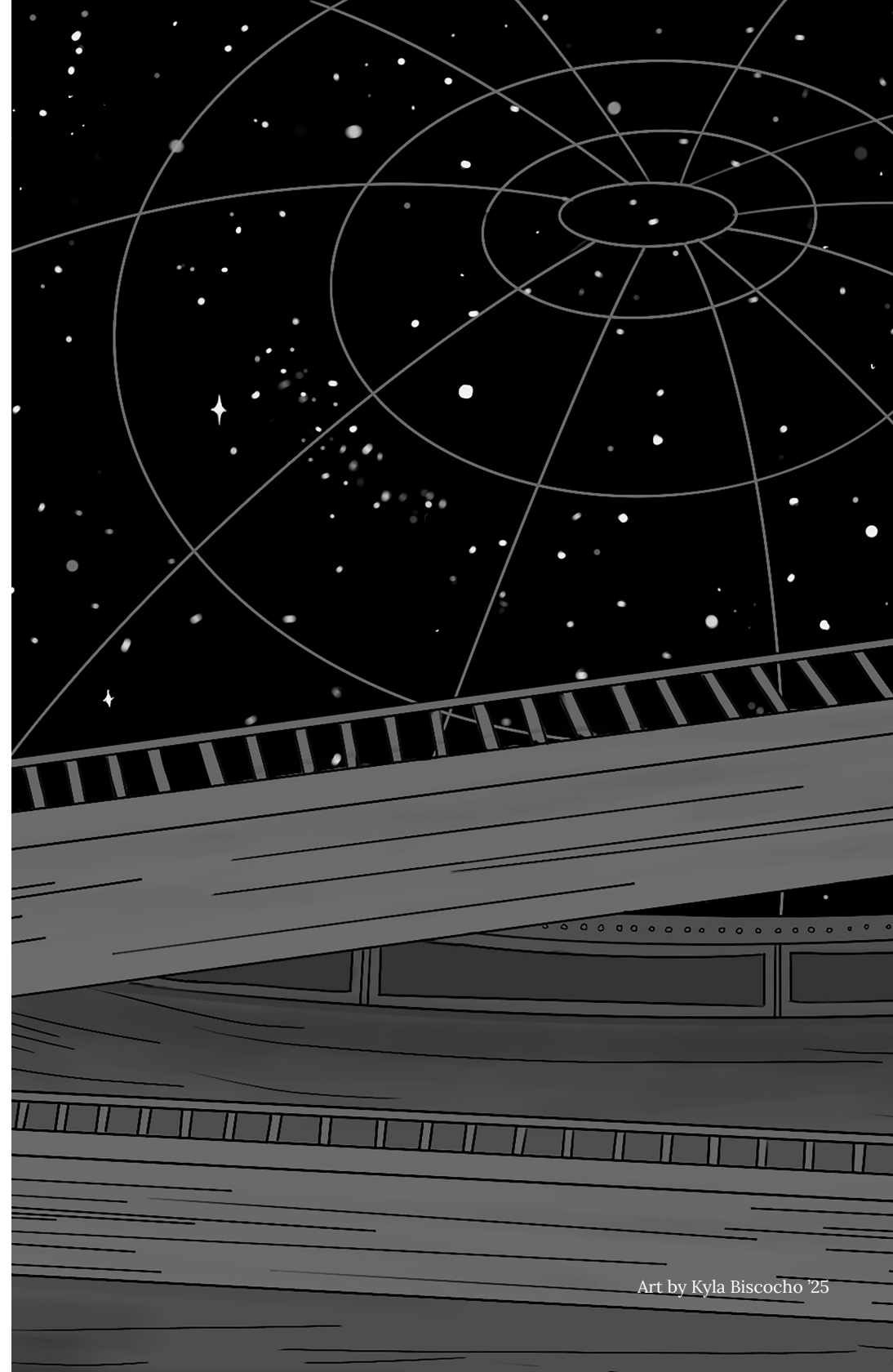
“The Great Burning?”

“It was a time where our planet was a much less hospitable place than it is today. Our geologists say that there may have been another very accomplished civilization before the great burning, one that might have actually been responsible for it. But we have no written records of what happened. We can only speculate.”

“You don’t think that my people might have left Earth before everything collapsed?”

“That very well could be.” Leila looked at Lief, now with a greater stillness out of an inner reverence for the mystery Lief represented. Lief looked back onto the sphere, towards his home planet, that one dark, hooded figure among this dazzling constellation of human history, now impossibly far away.

“There’s gotta be somebody back home who knows.”



THE THREE SISTERS

Eleanor Walsh | ewalsh25@amherst.edu

Once upon a time in a land far, far away there lived three sisters. The oldest sister had long, dark hair and knuckles that hissed when they were cracked. The middle sister had large, luminous eyes and pointed ears. The youngest sister had the voice of a songbird and the feet to match.

One day, walking down a path they had walked many times before, the three sisters stumbled upon a river. They could not see the bottom. It was too deep to cross. An ornate bridge arched over the rushing water, winking in the moonlight.

"What a beautiful bridge," sang the youngest sister. The other two agreed. It really was a beautiful bridge. So beautiful that it seemed out of place in the barren land where they lived. The bridge glowed silver in the evening light.

As the sisters drew closer, they could see that the beautiful bridge led to a barren land much like the one they stood upon. They wanted desperately to be there.

The youngest sister knew what happened next in stories like these.

"First we must answer a question that is asked of us," she sang.

They waited in silence, the bridge did not ask any questions.

"Perhaps," said the middle sister, "we should each give the bridge an offering." The other two agreed.

The oldest sister reached up and pulled out a handful of her long, dark hair. She wove it through the sides of the bridge.

The middle sister used her nails to remove her left eye, which was slightly more luminous. The iris reflected her own face back at her as she lowered it to the foot of the bridge.

The youngest reached into her throat and slowly drew out her songbird voice. She hung it as a garland across the bridge.

Now, the bridge asked a question.

"Hello, sisters," the bridge sang. "Why do you wish to cross my bridge?"

The oldest sister stepped forward, her scalp glowing in the twilight. "I wish to leave home," said the oldest sister. "I wish for change."

The bridge blinked once, twice, but said nothing more. The oldest sister knew she had answered wrong, and could not cross the bridge.

The middle sister shuffled forward, blood running from her left eye socket. "I wish for wealth," she said. "I wish to discover a land of abundance."

The bridge looked angry. The middle sister knew that she, too, could not cross the bridge.

Finally, the youngest sister came to the foot of the bridge. She said nothing, for she had no voice.

"Yes," sang the bridge. "You may cross me."

The sisters turned and went back home, and they lived happily ever after.



Art by Zoe Strothkamp '24



IT'S A STORMY NIGHT

Confusion. What people don't want to admit to themselves. Crossing the deepest part of the river.



Art by Sofia Yadigaroglu '26

KM:MK

Mel Arthur | marthur25@amherst.edu

we gather safely under our bliss and i perform a body that holds my sins

----- asks

what do you feel in the silence
what do you feel in the warmth
what do you feel in the center of your being
what do you feel between
silence what—where do you feel
the warmth lies

herein lies the silence of taut skin / vein: dripped
a web of untangled sound / the ache / rain smell in
the essence of your being / how the night shudders its way into/
he finds it— / he finds it hard to let loving you be / a
Belated act

Please
Don't ask

what consumption means when you peel
And i long to have to say i

apart my skin
miss you

My sunshine

when slime: gripped words
cherry: wine: guilt holding the line that
maybe, this is care repackaged
my flesh
that breathes as others look
as i cannot bear for them
way you bared your soul full
a melting point of stuck. But
when you hold it with your gaze
At once and not
when you ask how to open up a body
slow

kissed at my strings
divides over and over.
because i see how you enclose
a shame: love touch
in
to bare your soul the
of lonely lies
you make the sky tender
when you prove that hurt can be
a person
and my limbs
ready to fall.

SONG WITHOUT A BRIDGE, MOVIE WITHOUT AN ENDING

Gracie Rowland | growland25@amherst.edu

I fight with my own heart like a child, my hands
Grimy with self-pity and my stomach sick with impossible love.
I want out of this haunted house,
Want to abandon these papered walls,
These cherrywood floors covered in my blood.

Too smart for his own good and
Always feeling miserably misunderstood,
I'd still go back and do it all again if I could.
He saw me as a pretty poet with lots of baggage, as a
A wilted wildflower filled with impossible ideals and too much
heart,
Playing the manic pixie dream girl part.

Since he left I've spent most of the time pretending,
Telling everyone I'm okay,
A song without a bridge, a movie without an ending.

Who knew choices made at seventeen could torture like a
devil's dream?

My therapist used to say I view life under a magnifying glass.
Maybe she's right.
Why did he leave?
He never gave a reason and I lacked the courage to ask.

DISAPPEARING BRIDGE

Anonymous

Birds chirp above, but otherwise the din of daily life is muffled.
A small stream bubbles below a little bridge whose boards creek
disconcertingly when stepped on. Surrounding greenery hums
in the wind. Time slows down here, or perhaps doesn't exist
here at all.

Look at her, sitting there in a pew reserved for family members.
She murmurs along to the hymns, hardly remembering them
from the days Emmy took her to church, and runs her hand
nervously along the black dress she stole from her mom's closet.
As her thumb brushes the butterfly print that sweeps up the
sides of the dress, she imagines Emmy spreading her wings and
flying away. The people around her cry, but her face is wax-
en, and in her mind, she is hundreds of miles away, sitting on
that little bridge. She says goodbye to Winnie, off to live with a
family friend in the Midwest, whose canine smell and boundless
energy have only faded slightly with age. She remembers the
days that Winnie frightened her and runs her hand across the
wood of the little closed off reading nook Emmy built for her—a
hideaway from scary dogs and talkative people. As she sits out-
side, noticing the new wrinkles on her dad's forehead through
the twinkling stained glass Emmy made herself, she closes her
eyes and returns to the bridge.

Look at her, traveling through Paris, on a trip made possible
by Emmy. She stands in a Monoprix with her face in a freezer,
rubbing her chest, wishing she could stop feeling her irregularly
beating heart. Look at her, getting to college, somehow making
it through the summer. She knows that her fear of everyone
she loves dying is probably irrational. Her doctor prescribes
her "only-if-needed" panic attack pills. Her trips to the bridge
become less and less frequent.

Look at her, perusing an Urban Outfitters while she unknow-
ingly says goodbye to Maw Maw. She sits very still on a plane
home less than a month into college. Tears stream down her
face as she watches her grandfather cry for the first time, as
she squeezes him tight and he whispers in her ear, "Your visit
sustains me." She sings the last song Maw Maw ever heard her
perform to a crowd of people that she does not recognize and
stains her flowery dress with dirt as she shovels it onto the
grave. She walks through the halls of that big stone house, so
quiet now, and remembers all of the joyful snow days she has
spent there—the way that the sound of fire crackling and the

sweet smell of hot chocolate would fill its rooms and Maw Maw would smile, recounting stories from her youth. As she brushes her fingers across Maw Maw's exhaustive Agatha Christie collection, now technically hers, she remembers the days of micro-waved-Milky Ways, book discussions, and Jeopardy. She wants to find refuge in the bridge but can only manage it for moments.

Look at her, sitting in her dorm room, eating dark chocolate peanut butter cups and trying to forget how alone she feels. She crams her schedule, attempting to limit moments in which her mind can torture her, reminding her of the things that she will never do again, the hugs that she will never get again, the altered Thanksgivings and Christmases to come, the love that she has lost. These days, she only returns to the bridge in dreams.

Where is the bridge? Why is it not here? Silence is shattered, encroached upon by awkward condolences and mournful cries. The bridge has vanished, forcing hikers to awkwardly wade through creek water that gleams red to cross to the other side. The surrounding greenery is overgrown, so that no light can make its way through the canopy of leaves overhead. There is no peace here. What now? What next?

MOTH TO A BURNING FLAME

Sarah Wu | sdwu25@amherst.edu

Trigger warning: mention of suicidal thoughts

On the same bridge where my brother threatened to cast his body into the river, you tell me: "Wouldn't it be fun to jump?"

We sit together on the railing. Your eyes are the same color as the sky; only, the sky today is overcast and has turned your gaze colorless and sharp, the shade of glass. Your blonde curls flutter backward as a breath of breeze is released against your forehead; against the glittering water beneath us, you are someone painted into the world, each stroke a careful idea.

I am a moth in your presence, burning in your audacity. I think: there is nothing stopping you from pressing your warm hands against my chest; there is nothing stopping you from pushing me off the bridge, and already, I have imagined the act, the way my body will concave across the skies, the brutal exhale of flesh meeting water, a slap of pain, bubbles streaming from my consciousness.

I ask, "Aren't you afraid of death?" and the corners of your lips peel into a grin. Your pale blue eyes crinkle into a smile, and I think: this is the type of smile that my brother wished for but could never have.

"Isn't fearing death the most exciting way to live?" you answer, and my responses border on unacceptable:

- "Are you high?" &
- "How would you know what the most exciting way to live is?" &
- "What if I consumed you?"

because the way your smile curls from your chapped lips looks delicious enough that I could swallow you whole, press your blue smile against my slaving throat, pulsing with desire; I want to suck the freedom from your lips, your teeth; I want to live life the way a white man fears death—

because when I stare at you, you are the ideal image that my brother had desired. It was only a few years ago that my brother threatened me with his body; in a fit of passion, he gnashed his teeth together and whispered, "If you take one step forward, I will throw myself off." That night had dripped heavy with darkness, slipping sleep underneath my eyelids, and I remember the unfamiliar shadows creasing my brother's face: they made him look tired and small and old.

I swallow, and the bitter taste of spit rolls down; I ask: "When did you like philosophy?" and you laugh too. Below us, the water sways past the bridge, and it gurgles with the cheeriness absent from my throat.

We lock eyes. The mischievous smile on your face only widens. You smile like the world has been carved out just for you. "If you believe hard enough, you can be whatever you want to be," you say, and your eyes are so sharp, so bright. "You can even grow feathers and fly."

You look at me for approval, but I say nothing. I am silent because I certainly cannot tell you how my brother tried to believe, and that's when you lift your arms to the sky like a prayer. Your eyes are triumphant. You tilt forward and fall

and instinct turns you into my brother, tumbling;

I lurch forward

& suddenly, it's a high school night again. It is 4 AM, and my brother and I are supposed to be asleep, but I see the light bleeding from underneath my brother's door and my curiosity itches so I tiptoe to his room. I peek in, and he is staring at a mirror and the look on his face is curiously cool, like a plastic surgeon dissecting his face: curling the straightness of his black hair, smoothing the sharpness of his eyes

& on a Friday in middle school, he storms into the kitchen and grabs the scissors on the counter. The blades flash silver against the setting sunlight, so when he is finished, a thin fuzz of black dusts the marbled table; when I meet his dark eyes, a hint of terrible glee peers back, and I see the ridges and gorges left in his hair. The fringes look like ragged edges of blackened teeth, a rotting grimace, but before I can say anything, he has already disappeared

& before the elementary-school bus arrives, another child presses her fingers to the corners of her eyes; my brother doesn't turn his face away quickly enough and the reflection of my pale face reflects against the tears on his cheeks. When the bus splutters to a stop, my brother shoves through the line of students and tears them apart; I reach out too late, and my brother enters the bus, alone

& before he grew ashamed and angry and apathetic, he was a child who believed that he too, could look white.

And isn't there something painfully ironic that you are granted the indulgence to jump, but when my brother threatens to jump, he desires to gash his body against the swirling chaos of the waters? I drag him back because of my duty as a sister &

not because I particularly care, at least, not at that moment, because I am tired and it is 3 AM and neither of us is supposed to be awake & anyways, the bridge is low enough to risk just a broken bone & I remember thinking: perhaps if I had no younger brother, I would have my six hours of sleep & perhaps I would pass my history test tomorrow. Perhaps I would be happier.

When my brother cries, he cries alone against the rotting arms of the bridge; he is tired, tired from believing too hard. I stand on the opposite side of the bridge and I refuse to look at him because I too am tired of being a sister—

but when you jump, you see none of this.

My hands skin themselves bloody against the railing. When you finally resurface, wet curls smeared against your forehead, you are laughing, bright and loud, and when I meet your gaze, I am once again a moth disintegrating desperately against the envy of your freedom. I helplessly drift closer, the taste of desire sweet-sour against my lips, my palms throbbing.



Art by Nathan Lee '26

WHAT'S YOURS IS MINE

Gabrielle Avena | gavena25@amherst.edu

Trigger warning: mention of suicide

you are asking me to tell you a story, so i open my / mouth only to feel your-limp-tongue lolling out. i am trying to say, "hello!" i am trying to read, "once upon a time." i am trying to be more than what you left me. still, our-teeth gnash against any word that isn't this—

i.
we had to learn to share, my sister-and-i.

older by a year, she laid claim to the color purple. there was only one color left for little girls. i hated pink, but it was mine: my-pink, her-purple. once we tried reading a book together—her holding, me flipping—and she brushed off all the places where i touched the page, as if my fingers left invisible stains. in those days, i bewildered myself, guarded my tub of ice cream like a starved animal. back then, her hands were always in control of the controller.

but at the end of the day, we shared a bed. her-clothes were my-clothes. her-mother, my-mother; her-father, my-father. we are sisters, after all.

ii.
what we'd share, most of all, were secrets.

at 12, i finally had a room that was mine, all-mine. but sometimes—when her dreams were so bad she couldn't use the bathroom without me to stand there by the light—i'd let my sister climb into my / bed.

we barely touched, but i tried to hold her in those nights. sometimes, i whispered rhythmic patterns into her back with the soft blade of my fingernail. sometimes, i grasped at the slick, sick thoughts sluicing their way out of her mouth. i watched them pool in the folds of my palms. i watched her tremble.

iii.
the first time my sister-and-i shared a hug was the second time she tried to die.

and silly me, i gave her only more nooses to hang from. packed in a too-small suitcase: her first toy, twinkle the teddy bear, a

hanky dangling from its fists; the new sweater i knew she'd want to wear, drawstring cinched at the waist; a thick throw blanket to wrap around her body, to keep her warm. surgically sorted out my the psych ward; never got the chance to wrap our arms around her neck.

it was hard to think of her cold.

iv.
harder still to hear her living. returned to the other side of our / wall, thin as skin, leaking sound.

my favorite sliver of night was when my-space took shape in silence. she loved to fill its form with herself, her sound, pouring past the computer monitor through our / wall, she would yell ISHOULDHAVEKILLEDHERIWANTEDTOGOUGEHEREYE-SOUTYOUMOANANDIWISHYOUWOULDSTOPIWISHYOUWERE

dead quiet

v.
im sorry. im sorry. im sorry—

i didn't mean it. please don't die. i don't want to keep telling this story. i dont want to keep killing you when i write. i dont want to keep shining the spotlight on the knife.

i don't want to keep holding open this wound of yours / mine.



Art by Amy Zheng '26

GOING BACK

Bluma Hammarhead | bhammarhead26@amherst.edu

Here is—the monument,
The bare room heavy with artifacts:
Strange velvet balls, stacks
Of letters, papers,
Old journals full of hypotheticals,
And on the nightstand— “Theoretical
Linguistics”— idiot!
I hate her—hate that I still am her,
Curator, museum-maker, symmetry-seeker—
Placing knickknacks precisely,
Making everything *mean*.
It can't just be. It isn't is.
It's the whole verb synopsis:
What was, and is,

and isn't,
and was not,
and will not be,
and may not be,
and will not have been,
and let it not be, let's not—

Look here, let's sleep just in a bed, just sleep.
I can't. There is no bed.
There's my *childhood* bed,
My *childhood* sheets, *childhood* pillow,
And here—my present-day head—
I put it down, am lying on the dead
Old nights that at the time meant nothing,
But now all were notes
In some long song—

One shove and I'd send it all crashing:
Books, miniature vases, the broken typewriter—smashed—
And me at the center of the detritus
Coughing in the significant dust...
I've read too many museum signs— “Do Not Touch”—
To try it. So the vases stand intact,
Uncracked,
With ashes in their stomachs.
I know whose.
I know the girl who lined up the jars
In a line, just so, who had to *choose*,
Who never let coincidence ruin
The meticulous tomb—

God, I'm ridiculous,
Reading the tangle of clothes in my room
Like the dregs of tea

(Jesus, it's a pair of pants, it's not tea)
Reading ceiling cracks like lines
In a palm— here's the heart line...
There's the life line...

The pipe leaked. That's all.
The plaster cracked.
The dust has settled over things
Just as it always does, and always will.
I have come back. I am me still.
I will leave the old things as they are.
I will leave the old things as they were.
I will bring new flowers for the empty jar.
I will say *me* where my mind says *her*—

But in the night I slid from the bed, a symbol,
The moon was clear through the window,
Round as a cymbal,
I leaned my elbows on the sill— still:
I thought of things that were...

Then a ghost rises from the shattered shelf—
In her nightgown, with wide foreign eyes—
myself.

THE END OF THE ROAD



*Catharsis and relief. Recognition of the self. The journey
has been made.*



Art by Tiia McKinney '25

BRIDGES

Mikayah Parsons | mparsons24@amherst.edu

Trigger warning: mention of suicide

The girl on the bridge is plain faced. She wears overly round glasses and a middle part down bone-straight black hair. She hugs her arms to her chest, wearing a white baby tee and velvet black lounge pants, dangling her legs over the edge of the bridge when I join her.

“Hi.” She doesn’t look surprised to see me. In fact, she looks like she is somewhere else entirely. I slide into the seat next to her, and she jumps slightly when our elbows brush. “What are you doing out here?”

When she finally looks at me, I realize that she isn’t so plain faced at all. There is a dusting of orange freckles across light brown cheeks, and her eyes are espresso-colored and agonizingly open. By looking into her eyes for five seconds, I feel like I know her whole story. I see so much thought, so much anxiety, and so much pain. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, kicking her memory foam sneakers back and forth as cars pass on the highway beneath us. Her eyes return to the stretch of this pavement as if seeing it anew. “I always come here when I want to clear my mind.”

“To the bridge?” I ask her, concern laced under the sarcasm in my voice.

She narrows her eyes at me, bumping my shoulder slightly. “To the bridge, yes.” The girl is young. She is probably sixteen or seventeen, but her shoulders sag in defeat as if she has lived for an eternity.

“What are you running away from today?” It’s cold out. I see her breath when she blows out a heavy sigh. I stuff my hands into the pockets of my black jacket—the same color as her hair, a size too big, and not mine.

“I’m not running from anything.” She shrugs her shoulders, and her eyes travel to the jacket around me. I take the hint, shrugging it off and placing it around her shoulders.

“What are you running towards?” I revise my question.

As she looks at me, a single tear escapes her eyes, and everything around us seems to crumble. She gulps, scooting closer

to me. "I knew a man like you, once." When my eyebrows raise, she shakes her head. "No, no. He was nothing like you. You were only alike on the outside." I look down at myself and take note of my own white skin. It's strange to be so aware of it, and I immediately blush for thinking that. I nod, encouraging her to go on. "I met him on this bridge."

She sniffs, and I struggle in considering what I can provide her in this moment. In the end, I choose to offer her a stick of gum from my pocket. She laughs hysterically for a beat too long, a beat in which my concern for her escalates, before she stops laughing abruptly and completely. She takes the stick of gum, opens it, and extends the wrapper toward me. In our two second exchange, she folded the paper in the shape of a heart. "It's the only thing I can make," she explains. I look at the time on my watch discreetly. It's almost time, but something about this moment with her feels important to me.

She looks at me again, and her face cycles through a myriad of emotions. "I hate you," she says to me. She balls her hands into fists and covers her face with them as if she's going to fight me. "I hate you. I hate you." She closes her eyes and punches my shoulder weakly before falling into my chest.

I let her cry against the fabric of my old gray t-shirt and pat her back gently. There are things in life that seem to require some instruction, but no one tells you how to do them properly. Comforting someone is one of those things. Yet, somehow, we manage. She sniffs loudly, mumbling words into my chest. I pull back slightly. "I'm sorry. I can't hear you."

"I really didn't want to hate you." She wipes tears from her eyes in order to look at me evenly. She squints as if trying to see something that no one else can. "But it didn't just happen once. It happened six times, and they all looked like you."

Her words feel like a slap in the face. I consider the fact that maybe they should. "Okay." I'm not sure if it's the right thing to say. Who am I to comfort her? My sorries don't mean anything.

She furrows her brows as if she didn't expect this response. "They all judged me because of how I look. I don't want to do the same thing to you, but aren't I owed it? I mean... after everything people have done to me because they've assumed things, do I have some right to do the same? I don't want to do the same. I just want some accountability." Her ideas are beginning to sound less and less cohesive but more and more emotional.

I blink. "So, hate me."
She narrows her eyes. "Are you serious?"

I shrug my shoulders, placing my hands on my lap. "I'm not sure that I can answer your question. What do reparations look like for inhumane acts? We can never put a price tag on dehumanizing other people. I don't need to tell you that. Until we figure it out, hate me."

She laughs, and it grows maniacal. I notice that she's crying even as she chuckles. "That's so silly."

"It's not silly." I kick my legs over the side of the bridge, turning to face her. I hug my knees to my chest, the distance of my lower half between us. "But will this even help you? Having my permission to hate me? I'm still in this privileged position of allowing something to you. There's no way to go about this where I don't have the power."

I shake my head. "It doesn't really matter what you think of me. Take what you need. I just want to make sure you're okay."

The clock across the street ticks loudly, and the bell above it chimes.

This is the anniversary of the day my brother committed suicide.

She looks at me, and her features finally relax. "I don't think I can be okay."

I nod. "Okay."

When she looks at me, she smiles. "How are you saying all the right things?"

I smile back at her, handing her the cell phone in my hand. Dialed in is a number that will connect her to resources far better than me—people that understand her and have more answers than me. As she looks at the phone skeptically, I shrug. "There are better things to say and better people than me." I shake my head again, this time apologetically. Maybe a sorry can count for something—if you really mean it, if you know why you're apologizing. Slowly, she takes the phone from my hand.

When I smile at her for the last time, my eyes glisten. "Take what you need."

A CROSS WALK IN A LABYRINTH

Dustin Copeland | dcopeland25@amherst.edu

My mother said that the pedestrian bridge over arrow-straight Route 1 was finally finished and that we were going to stop to talk a walk over it and my brother said what, why, and my mother ignored his deadpan because she had already pulled into some parking lot (how did she know where to park?) and we were already getting out to have a nice little walk. /

I was bemused mostly because I was like at maximum ten years old, but also by my mother's insistence that we stop our routine journey home in order to cross and then re-cross a pedestrian bridge. An overpass for people with a parking lot at each end. /

I remembered recently that 70% of the planet is parking lot, and also that parking lots are infinite, or at least spherical, and that it is therefore impossible to travel between them. If I cross from one parking lot to another, I have bridged worlds. I no longer need a car, because I broke parking lots. /

The pedestrian bridge over arrow-straight Route 1 was finally finished, and we were going to stop to walk over it—

—What? Why? I wondered.

—What. Why. My brother said.

(I feel as if I am building this, not writing (is all writing building? Have I been doing this wrong? I can't seem to start this story) but assembling it from parts that I want desperately to become music

— An overpass for people with a parking lot at each end, but our car is only at one. Ten-year-old me is pretty bemused by the inexplicability of my mother's will, but it is my mother's will.

It can't have been for family bonding that she pulled us over; don't you need someplace beautiful for that? That part of Route 1 was the least beautiful stretch of road I had ever seen up to that point. Maybe it still is. It could have been for /

I remembered recently
the roar of the outside is a black-soot river's version
of power noise, a twisted and boring Merzbow. A real
river is closer to zen, closer to his music, an arrange-
ment of sounds and colors and birds. Jumbled and
confusing but overpoweringly centered. Embodied

by the mind turning clear, experiencing as a body the
music; what if I made you hear this as music?

But here, steel churns and expels farts into a pancak-
ing sky, and even as I am awed by the parking lot I feel
it as a confining layer, a no-flow boundary, denying
recharge from rain or streams to the sediment below
my feet. The water there is pumped, maybe, and the
parking lot sinks because the ocean can't give back
the water it took but she tries and it is up to our
knees. Open the hood. Keep the engine running to
quicken evaporation. I am a voyeur who reads other
people's lives and feels unseasonably warm. /

My mother, on a drive home on Route 1, once pulled her car and
two children to the nearest parking lot in order to have us cross a
pedestrian overpass that had just been completed passing over the
least beautiful road in America.

What, why, my brother said, but pull the car over she did, and we
three exited into the roar of traffic on this arrow-straight highway.
/

I-70 through Kansas is about as straight as Route 1 between New
Brunswick and Trenton, but it's Kansas: the interstate there feels
utopian in the modernist sense, evoking the sublime with its logic
that transcends people. The blood of the nation, of the world, flows
fast on that super-mega-highway laid above the farmers' soil,
supplanting the horizon-line, casting shadow on the farms and oil
wells trying desperately to extract enough to match the 18-wheeler
thunder, to fill the nation's veins.

Route 1, on the other hand, flows like it's varicose, stopping and
starting with overpass-bound exits sandwiched by four-way inter-
sections and red lights—except for when there isn't an intersection
at all, just a turn into a parking lot. There are no merging lanes,
there is no real speed limit, and there is no room for driver error.
Just dealerships on one side and chain-linked food houses on the
other. /

here, and there is no room for driver error because there is no
speed limit.
world may pass the farms by on the super-mega-highway, a vein
is raised above the height of the corn and sunflowers and feels like
a modernist irrigation channel, supplying product, money, oil for
the joints. /

"I tried hard to imagine my poems or any poems as machines that

could make things happen... but I could not imagine this, could not even imagine imagining it." /

There's this pedestrian overpass on Route 1 (or is it 18?) that my mother once stopped the family car to traverse as a detour on my, my brother's, and her journey home; we made the pointless trek halfway across that bridge between Malouf Ford and the Buffalo Wild Wings (which, on reflection, makes way less sense as a place for such an overpass than the alternative /

There's this pedestrian overpass on Route 1 (or is it 18? Reflecting on this memory, which will turn out to be about a walk my brother, mother, and I took halfway across the subject overpass, makes it seem like 18 might be more likely. In favor of the memory taking place on Route 1: constant traffic, complete lack of pedestrian infrastructure. In favor of 18: a precedent of regular foot traffic given the high school's position across the highway from the nearest neighborhoods. It feels more logical, further, that the parentheses can't seem to close /

We didn't make it all the way over the bridge, obviously, because we already knew intimately whatever piece of Piscataway geography was on the other side (and anyway our car was only in one of the parking lots. I only remembered that recently; thought it was a great metaphor for the destruction of the planet and the American society's progression to just the first of those three A's: many of us are aware that we are plunging into a sea who will have no problem swallowing all of our yesterdays whole and will spit nothing back, we are aware that we are crossing a literal bridge into a new era of constant and world-wide devastation (for most people), and yet the mind-bridge on the other side of which lies the route to accountability for our power-hungry politic scientist robots in suits who are us who protect themselves from death by giving it to them will never be crossed, because our car is only in one of the parking lots) /

Is it possible for me to move from one parking lot to another? Can a poem carry me?

)
)
)



阿嬤，我想你

Evelyn Chi | etchi25@amherst.edu

To be loved
Is to wake up to a bowl of steaming hot 稀飯
Tender, bright orange 地瓜 floating
In a sea of glistening 白飯,
To have the tablemat set out already
Smoothed out by wrinkled, veiny 手
Worn by years of 煮菜 and 洗完。
Those same 手 have placed
Wooden 筷子 and a 湯匙 on each side
A bowl of 肉鬆, a jar of 酸黃瓜,
And your favorite 麵筋 in front of you
A clean metal spoon in each, ready to be scooped。

My 阿嬤
還沒吃飯
Instead, she sits next to me, watching me as I slurp
Imitating the satisfying sound of me inhaling food
While she inhales air
Shhhuuuulp, shhuulp
Happy that I am happy
that 我愛吃她做的菜,
因為 I am savoring her 愛
With every spoonful of her 地瓜稀飯。

And to feel love
Is to 哭 when you are five
Facing the dark ceiling as you try to sleep
With no warmth of 阿嬤 in the bed snoring softly next to you.
Hot, salty tears, sliding uncomfortably down your ears
Your neck
Wetting the sides of your pillow,
You get up and ask your 媽媽 to
打電話給阿嬤
So you can weep softly into the phone, crying
阿嬤，我想你
阿嬤，我想你
When she's already halfway across the world。



A SOVEREIGN / TWO BODIES

Aidan Cooper | acooper26@amherst.edu

"He [the king] has, or takes, the land in his natural Body, yet to this natural Body is conjoined his Body politic, which contains his royal Estate and Dignity...and these two Bodies are incorporated in one Person" - Ernst Kantorowicz

She stands before a sculpture named *Look*
Where she unspools twine from the knots
She loosened from her wrists the sigils
Heaving like words in a throat opened
Her Prayer like a touch and boiling
Shiver turning the dust-clouds into rain.

He stands before a lectern named *Wash*
Where he uncoils ribbons from the holes
He cut through his fingertips the callouses
Spinning like words in a throat opened
His Confession like a breath and frothing
Sieve turning the faucet-spit into wine.

She stands before a cabinet named *Him*
Where she unfastens metal from the wounds
He fashioned from his longing the edges
Dulling like words in a throat opened
Her Mouth like an end and whistling
Language turning him and her into them.

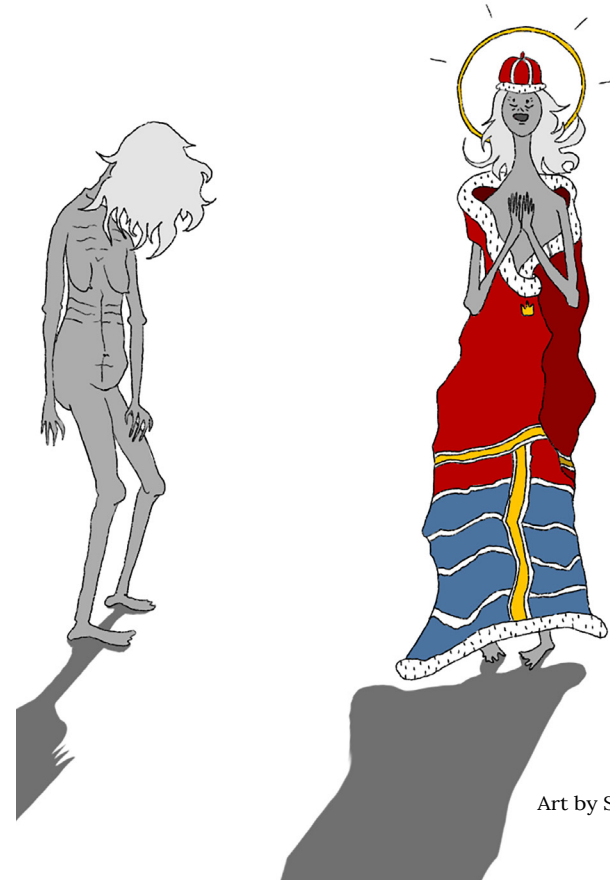
He stands before a maelstrom named *Her*
Where he uncovers stardust from the skin
She buried in her histories the diamonds
Thawing like words in a throat opened
His Arms like a wish and rippling
Music turning her and him into them.

They step into a Body named *Them*,
A sovereign dressed in dashes—in the
Oneness—of blood and otherwise.
They wash the sheets—in their creases,
Hands like residue—they look until
They know—all has been taken in.
They caress the cracks—of their Body,
Rolling—with the force of water—
Against a charged calm of white,
These puppet strings, these finger blades
Melting into entropy—into thirsting skin.

Are you hurting? Can you know me?
Form—a dialogue of breath—that never
Speaks in anything but wind-chimes
I open—I am vessels—I open
A crescendo of self—the taste of
Salt—a latticework that pieced their
Organs into motion—their storm
Breaks in rearing stars and thunder—
In the grandeur and silence of a
Church bell falling. Wet and earning,
They hold their Body in a singular
Time—one unfinished, but crackling
Like Godhood just the same.

He stands before an artist named *She*

She stands before a painting named *He*
And the roil beckons, ebbs.



GOOD LIFE

Fahim Zaman | fzaman25@amherst.edu

John Borges, we would love to award you,
Before you leave, for a good life
Lived, Johnny—
If not for a few objections.

Let's see here, ah, at four some years just,
You cursed in Church,
And eight you gave up on God;
At four months, you peed on your father's

Face when he changed your diapers;
Yet too quickly at one you used toilets,
But forgot to flush about nine times
(In your lifetime)—forty purposely not—

(In your lifetime) you never saw
The northern lights, nor a macaw
Flying—No white tigers, the Petra,
Nor kissed your dream boy, be an astronaut—

Your childhood goal at what? Ten or so,
And eighteen, wanted to be a father
Because your poetry was too much
And A's on half your English courses

Told you to—You met her then too
And though she wanted no kids,
You got her pregnant at twenty-two
(When you graduated),

And you married your college sweetheart,
Under the palm tree of your backyard,
Against your father's
Wishes.

You drove her from her home three
States away, with a group of friends,
To your new home
And she gave birth,

In who knew where, your first-born
On the car seat of a Toyota Camry.
And you mourn your mother's death in two days,
And you make banana bread next morning.

Twelve, there was a cat
You'd see on your walk to work,
And you were scared of cats,
And the cat was never white;

When you were five, you dive
Unauthorized into DisneyWorld pools,
And strive, during midlife,
To finish your PhD somewhat soon,

And your wife had no sex since your baby;
Instead, she'd just touch herself,
And your baby had been named Emile,
(Mother was named Emily);

Tenure as Spanish professor, you wrote
None of the fantasies you acted
Under the palm tree of your backyard
Only to be chalked up as "okay"—

Your wife died under a pin oak,
A stroke, and you hate banana bread,
Since seven, when you first tried it,
But you kept trying, now and then, because

It had a delicious name, like the
Names Marcel, Sylvia, Lyra, Eliza—
You married Elizabeth, grad student,
Thirty-nine under a birch tree,

And you didn't flush for the fortieth time,
On your fortieth birthday, and
There was a macaw outside the pet shop,
Five to eighteen, and it never once flew

Just perched on the folding chair, you watched
Your students talk and your mouth
Move; you went back home after
Your father's

Death.
You had traveled:
Fifty countries,
and only could

Remember your backyard from all those,
Where you wanted to be buried,
But you never told anyone,

And you were buried by Eliza

At the local cemetery;
You cried at the funeral—
You pronounced it FUNNERALL,
All smiling, at four,

And thirteen, math was too hard,
And eighty, you forgot what you did yesterday
And two more, you were rushed to the hospital,
And three, you played Pokemon

Platinum in the emergency room,
And Luxray was your favorite,
Eighty-two, Eliza cried on your hand,
And seven, your mother did the same, and

And seven, you went to the zoo,
They had put Carlita the white tiger,
Away for the day,
And you were crying under a palm tree,

Looking at pamphlets of Petra's churches,
And you swore you didn't wanna leave
And mama and papa didn't get it,
You didn't want it to end—

I want banana bread—
Como mierda! Mierda!
It tastes like
The saddest lines ever written.



Art by Haoran Tong '23



Art by Etta Gold '23

ABOUT A PLACE BETWEEN PLACES

Caelen McQuilkin | cmcquilkin23@amherst.edu

If you're here now, at the junction of Highways 395 and 120, you must have passed through the town of Pearsonville in the early morning light. There's this one awesome Shell gas station out there that has every flavor popsicle you can imagine. It's one of the few along Highway 395, those thousands of miles of asphalt that string together so much of California.

Outside this gas station, the desert hues that usually fade into the background fill the entire landscape, and I wonder, what happens when the whole world around you becomes the colors that usually uplift other things? What happens when that's all that there is?

When you sit and look for a few minutes, you see how rich the palette of sage and burnt orange and deep brown around you truly is, how delicate the creosote flowers become when you choose to look at them up close.

And now here we are, 200 miles north on the highway, another place between places. I'm guessing you'll have to keep driving to make it to Yosemite Valley before the parking lots fill up, but if you decided to stop in town outside the red benches in front of the market and sit for a while, you might be shocked at what you find.

We've all cried on those red benches at some point, I know I have. Stop for a minute, you might hear us talking about why D decided to become an atheist because of astronomy, or that one free throw B made three years ago that threw the game into an overtime victory. Some people call it gossip but I call it a way of piecing this world together,

That is poetry—poetry doesn't have to be grand poetry doesn't have to be romantic or even beautiful I think, poetry is the way people turn to look at each other on those red benches, poetry is sitting on C's sheet-covered couch eating Cup of Noodles watching the Dodgers on one of those Sundays where the sun's bearing down too hard from the sharp blue arc of sky.

Let's walk down Main Street, which is actually just highway 395. Look, that's the bakery on your left. The turquoise paint is thick and the brown paint is peeling because the jobs were done at different times, and if you happened to be here at 4 in

the morning you might see a light in the window. Do you think there's different types of knowledge in this world and do you think that one of them is knowing exactly how much of a big chunk of bread dough to cut off so that it weighs 2.0 ounces and is ready to get rolled up to bake after your first try cutting it?

The bakery requires that every piece of dough be rolled, but I always wondered what it would look like braided, because one time last year in English class my friend S asked the poet Tiana Clark how to stop writing about things that make him sad and she said, I invite you to try and imagine what it would be like to braid joy into your writing alongside all that sorrow. Imagine a bay leaf in soup, she said, like keeping a little fragment of joy somewhere in mind and even if it doesn't end up in the final product, maybe there will still be a trace of it left there.

I was walking with D last summer and we passed a bush and he said *I think these are bay leaves*. I picked three which I brought with me from California to Massachusetts and they now sit on my dresser,

I'm honestly not even sure if they are really bay leaves, but I guess that's kind of the point.

Here's 3rd Street, an important one. Not to be dramatic or whatever but some of the people I owe my life to live on this street. My friend L talks with her hands and her hands start to move faster when she's trying to express the ideas we don't have words for. One afternoon this summer we sat at her kitchen table—can you see it through the curtains?—for three hours by accident (one of those kinds of conversations) and she said, *this town is way too small for A and your sister, I just feel like they deserve, like, the stars*. And the only thing I could think to say was nodding slowly and saying *yeah*. *Yeah*.

It was at that same kitchen table in January 2018 when L told me *if you think you're in love then you're in love*. We shape and color love through our perceptions, meaning it's exactly what we believe it is, and if somebody tells you it's not, well, they must have a different definition of love.,,,

In the same way that how we see things stitches together the line of the horizon and the time at which dusk fades into twilight.

D's horizon is the mountains she woke up seeing out her window every morning, E's is the scale on a drawing, K's

the line where ocean meets sky and B wrote to me about his: *the first, though not only, horizon that comes to mind is more of a skyline. Lights and towers, lights on towers, roll out to the natural horizon. The glow resolves to a soothing yellow that blurs the line where peninsula meets sky.*

We're basically at the other end of town now, that's how small this place is, you can drive through in one minute. But the school's here, that classroom with white tiles on the walls is where we read *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. I remember the poem about clouds and the poem about the four skinny trees that "keep keeping."

The other day I was walking with M and we got to this old, old juniper tree. We both put our hands on its gnarled trunk wrapped around chunks of granite and she said *these trees are the kind of trees that keep keeping, that is what is important in this world*

But sometimes just *being* sounds better than *keeping*, right?

The pavement of this street looks worn and faded right now, but I promise you when it rains here in the summer it feels like some part of the world is breaking open. In Eastern California people do this funny thing where you go outside and hold up your hands and spin around slowly like wow! We are in the desert! And it is raining!

And like a mirage in that desert where it sometimes rains, poetry isn't sitting there to be found, you can't reach out and touch it. Maybe it's more like we create ways of seeing it, piece it together ourselves,

Come sit down on the red benches / maybe we can learn together.

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