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Submission for International Women's Photography Association Award

Theme: Fraternity

My project explores women's friendship in a small, isolated college campus in rural Massachusetts. In such an environment, students are isolated from the world and hyper-focused. Instead of typical images of classrooms, rolling mountain sides, and football games traditionally associated with the US collegiate experience, I take a close lens to how women on campus relate to themselves and others. From ages 18-22, these women move through an inherently transient space, personalizing rooms they will vacate in a year, developing close bonds with others who happen to share some of the four years they pass in the place before moving on. The photos capture the friendship, love, and intimacy extended to each other as protection from an often hostile, incredibly high-pressure environment.

While the common narrative around Williams College suggests the geographic isolation is meant to be a blissful retreat from the world to focus on studies and self-improvement, the reality many students face is far from idyllic. Mental and physical health plummets for many in the pressure cooker environment where 2,000 students live and work separate from the rest of the world, snowed in for almost 6 months of the year. The incredible pressure of students' workload is sharpened for some by historical and current power hierarchies. The college was all male until the 1970s, and traditionally educated children of America's wealthy elite. Though the college has made efforts to diversify, the history of male-domination, elitism, and whiteness pervade the environment. Rape culture is inescapable, with conservative estimates suggesting a quarter of women on US college campuses experience sexual assault. Further, many of the young women depicted are first generation Americans or college students, carrying the weight of immigrant parents' sacrifices and high expectations.

Through all of this, these women's greatest balm remains each other. I focus on intimate moments in dorm rooms where deep insecurities and precious hopes are revealed to closest friends. I offer moments of ecstatic, jubilant release from self-consciousness through partying. One common theme is physical touch and embrace in an intense academic environment, where one is expected to put intellectual pursuits over the care of their bodies and health. Romantic interests, future aspirations, immediate rivalries, family strife, and homework stress are parlayed through the air. Comfort is exchanged in the form of words and touch. There is solidarity. There is rivalry. This series is about the space these women hold, physically and metaphorically, for each other. Embracing themselves and each other, they hold space for each other to dream. To grieve. To celebrate. To rest. To release. Through all of this, I offer a portrait of young women struggling to find themselves and their futures in an increasingly unstable world.

In the first photo, Apurva recounts an adventure while laying in Vero's lap, while the other checks emails and smiles in amusement. Vero's recently washed, makeupless face contrasts to the image of her costumed as a pin-up, also photographed by me, which she has pasted on her closet door underneath calendar photos of Beyonce. Vero and Apurva return in the sixth photo in a wildly different scenario. Apurva grinds on Vero, who laughs and leans on the table for support. It's Halloween night, and the two are hosting a well-attended party in their common room. Leia and Akhir are another pair cosseted in a dorm room, a place where the respite from the outside world envelops the figures emotionally and in the pile of objects personalizing the dorm room. In the next photo Izzie strikes a pose while against Merudjina. The costumes mark the occasion, a dress rehearsal for the dance group Kusika. The drama and excitement infuse fuel the figures. In the mirror, Akhir reviews a photo just snapped on Bingyi's phone.

Jordan and Al are on a brief pause after class outside of the studio art building. Jordan takes the fresh air and Al takes a cigarette. They are juniors about to start their final senior year. They are both art majors in the same cohort. Alex lays on Emma who leans on Fumni, their limbs entwined like the Three Graces. It is very late, and drinking and dancing have become giggles and cuddling. Each of the three girls wear rings. Spread against her yellow curtains, Tang and her friend lie together and think about Christmas, which is coming closer. They dream about finishing classes and seeing families for the holidays.

Alex and Ashley are exhausted on a Friday night. It's nearing finals time, and both are trying to distract themselves unsuccessfully from their overwhelming workload. It's the middle of the softball season for Ashley, who is the team's pitcher. She is not partaking in drinking while in season, and has just stopped by to say hi to her friends. In the same room at a different time, Evan and Kennedy hold each other. They are first years and have stumbled into an older student's gathering with their whole friend group. The series ends with Apurva and Janae holding each other at a graduation celebration.

These moments are raw and generous because they are the product of my love and friendship for these women. I am one of them. I am not depicted in any of the photographs. However, I am present in all of them. For these women's presence and support during my time in college, I am so incredibly grateful.