Senior Speech: Antonella Dec-Prat, Class of 2019

Our Opening Sentences Come to Us From Contemporary Japanese Artist Yayoi Kusama:

“If there’s a cat. I obliterate it by putting polka dot stickers on it. I obliterate a horse by putting polka dot stickers on it. And I obliterated myself by putting the same polka dot stickers on myself.”

A Reading from Theologian Soren Kierkegaard:

“The specific character of despair is precisely this:

it is unaware of being despair.”

And from Dante’s Inferno:

“But the stars that marked our starting fall away.

We must go deeper into greater pain...

For it is not permitted that we stay.”

And crossing over the chasm’s edge,

We came to a spring that boiled and overflowed through a great crevice,

Worn into the ledge.”
“She’s allergic to idiots.” I’m sitting by a school pool getting ready for my race. Looking up from my chlorine soaked towel, I see a pretween boy. He stands there, pointing at my legs. Immediately, I recognize the all too familiar scene. The boy has just invariably asked, “what are her spots?” or “what’s wrong with her?” or, and my personal favorite, “is that contagious?” Holly, my best friend, has responded with her classic one liner: “she’s allergic to idiots.” The boy blushes and walks away.

When we were younger, Holly’s retort was perfect. Witty enough to embarass a pre-tween boy, polite enough that we wouldn’t get in trouble. However, I was never able to say it. I could nevexr respond to the comments that hurt me. The ones that targeted the one fault I was ashamed of and could never change - my dotted skin. The red scales covered my limbs and torso. The white dots of past dead skin that would only go away in the summer. The question of the boy at the poolside hurts me, taps into my deepest insecurities and fears.

I wonder if you’ve ever heard of psoriasis? Basically, if you have psoriasis you think you have a skin issue. But then you find out your autoimmune system believes your own skin cells to be enemies and sends out signals to fight them. Skin cells die, leaving scales and discoloration. Everyone’s psoriasis is different. Kim Kardashian, has large patches on her legs. Cara Delevingne has small patches on her stomach. I have tiny dots all over me. Autoimmune diseases are notoriously enigmatic. All we DO know about them: 1. There is no cure 2. They show up differently for everyone 3. They cannot be conquered only lived in.

It took me a long time to learn this. Over the years, I had experienced eczema, and conjunctivitis, and rashes, I’ll stop there. At one point, these spots show up and my mother takes me to the dermatologist. This wasn’t the fancy psoriasis specialist, this was a public clinic free for anyone in London. In the waiting room, a scaley boy sits opposite me. In the corner, a girl in a red t shirt turns around, she is balding and covered with burns. A mother carries her baby by me, and I catch a glimpse of a red flaky body. I shift in my plastic-covered seat, adjust my burgundy school uniform, and turn to look out of the window. I don’t want to see their strange skins. All these kids, though, are at the same dermatologist as I am. They sit on the same plastic seats as I do. They all play with the same toys in the waiting room. I feel claustrophobic and sweaty. They scare me. But I look like them. I must need the same help.

Years later, I’m walking across Central Park. Crossing Fifth Avenue, I decide to expose my arms to the springtime sun. I take the path on 72nd, the gravely one that wanders from the east to the west side. I walk in front of a family of tourists, two parents, a little girl and a son in a buggy. Hearing them speak Italian, I innocently eavesdrop. They are talking about how fun the horse carriage was, how excited they are for the Empire State Building, and, of course, how the weather is just a bit too cold. Just so you know, Italians are obsessed with complaining about the weather. And then the daughter asks “che cosa ha?” “what does she have?” I slow down.
Maybe it’s not about me. The father joins in, “I don’t know, it must be a skin thing.” It IS about me. “How strange, maybe she burned herself” the mother continues. They try to guess what I have, try to guess what I might have done to deserve the spots. Finally, the daughter inquires, “can it happen to me?” and the father reassures her “no, of course not.”

The girl is probably a year younger than I was when I was first diagnosed. The dots on my skin feel like they’re burning into me. I only am my skin. I feel ugly, repulsive, impure.

Last summer I was on a float for the Pride Parade. My 12 year old little sister had hooked me up with a great spot - a teenager on the middle school float. I was that bar mitzvah hypeman who gets the kids dancing. I wore a neon yellow romper - my newest fashion obsession, with a light grey sweater. Towering above the kids, I YMCA dance my way up and down Christopher Street. 80s pop music blasting around me. People blow kazoos out of their West Village apartment windows. Rainbow crowds cheer me on, even though my running man was awful.

After the parade breaks up, I descend the subway steps and already I feel that humid subway heat. I start sweating through my sweater. Away from the cheers and on the subway platform, I don’t want to expose my psoriasis. The train arrives. It’s an empty train car. This could mean one of two things: there’s crazy person or unairconditioned. It’s a hot one. I’m stubborn, it’s one of my greater faults, and I refuse to get off this subway car. I begin peeling off my grey sweater, searching for someone who might look at me like the Italian family did. Believing the coast to be clear, I take the sweater off. The man next to me stands up, shouting, “What!? This girl has chicken pox! Get her away from me.” He escapes to the opposite end of the car. Everyone is staring at me. I begin to sob on the subway... and all the way home. I sob all that night. My family can do nothing to comfort me.

Because they can’t live inside my skin. They can’t know how it feels to look like a mutant when I walk down the street. I will never appear normal. People will stare, criticize, or avoid me. Especially in the summer. Someone will look at my skin, look at my face, and look back at my skin. It’s a brief glance...and then a double take. By now, I know that most people are just curious, not always malicious. In their eyes, I feel their pity... I feel their curiosity...and most of all I feel their fear. I understand them - I’ve looked at people that way before. Back as my eight-year-old self in the waiting room, I remember how much I feared ......... But I’ve also seen myself like that before. As nothing but a clinical condition. Seen myself as weird, other, as something to be scared of.

On the subway, I sobbed. I sobbed because part of me knew the man is right: there is reason to fear. I am NOT perfect
I’ve always internalized that fear and without knowing it, that worry slowly became a large part of who I am. I started using it as an excuse. If I felt lonely, it was because I had to go to sleep covered in tar cream. If the boy I liked didn’t like me back, it was because I looked like a leopard hybrid. If I wasn’t invited to a party, it was because I shed skin wherever I went. I researched the web trying to find how others coped with their psoriasis. But all of them lived behind their disease and hid their bodies. Comment threads on covering their skin in the summer, on avoiding the beach, and on dating with psoriasis. I accepted that this was going to be my life. I hid my body in photos, taking photos from the neck up, and in long sleeve clothes. I let myself be consumed by how ugly people thought my disease was.

I wish I could say I have seen my skin as my only imperfection. Having the condition, however, made me increasingly aware of my other flaws. At Trinity, I encountered a new type of purity. All As, school president, in the top school. And when I didn’t achieve these goals, I felt like a failure. I became afraid - afraid of what my future would be, afraid of others expectations of me and how they would feel when I failed them. I couldn’t just be perfect academically here, though, I needed to be physically perfect too. I wanted everything I did to appear effortless. I wanted others to look at me and view me as the quintessential Trinitarian. And I needed to look the part. I focused on the superficial, skin deep success at school. But try as I could academically, I felt as though my physical appearance let me down from achieving my dream status. My dots barred me from being perfect.

I became self-conscious. When I woke up and saw new flakes on my face, the whole day was marked by these dry patches. It meant I needed to pick an outfit where I wouldn’t see my skin, I needed to pack moisturizer just in case, I needed to stay inside and away from the sun. It’s true for so many women, and Trinity is no exemption. We don’t feel confident in our bodies, disease or not. We’ve been forced to subscribe to one idea of perfection and when we don’t meet it, we become obsessed with the ways in which we think we fall short. We fixate on our flaws, and ignore everything that makes us so awesome. I certainly felt that way.

By the end of junior year my skin was at its worst, yet I didn’t even register how bad it had gotten. I pushed my brain, never stopping to think about my body. I wore long sleeves so I would not even have to look at it. Eventually this summer straight off of my junior year, I realized something needed to change - and I set about trying to listen to my skin because it tells me things. I started to pay more attention to it, and learned that it had lessons to teach.

In the dermatological lexicon, we all have triggers. They are activities, habits, or really anything that can blow up our bodies. Some psoriasis examples include: “have you tried cutting out gluten - that could be your trigger” “Maybe you should stop sitting in the sun - that could be your trigger” “Maybe you need some relaxation: eat some pasta get some sun - that could be your trigger”. Others might be the anxiety we feel before a presentation, the fear of an in class
essay, or giving this speech. The body speaks to us, tells us what’s bad for us. The body knows what we don’t want to acknowledge and it is there to remind us. It told me I shouldn’t stress too much over track. It reminded me that while some things are important, they are not all life-threatening. Listen to your bodies!

Don’t ignore them. At Trinity, we often do. We are judged by our brains, by what we can produce with it, by how we train it. The body is cumbersome - it doesn’t give us As. It needs too much coffee. The body could never take the ACT. The body can hinder us - our hands cramp up during tests. We can feel ugly. We ignore our bodies, all of us. Whether we sleep only 5 hours, come to school sick, or miss meals to study. Sometimes, we even punish ourselves. We have disordered eating, are obsessed with working out, try to see how far we can push our bodies without destroying our minds. But, I get to see sure physical evidence of my ignorance and abuse. I see it when new dots crop up because I slept too little. I feel it when I forget to apply my cream regimen and endure a day of itchiness. My skin disease forces me to register for a brief moment that I exist in this school not just as a mind but as a body too. I have to take care of myself if I am ever to function properly.

But don’t worry this isn’t a solo journey, people will be kind and support you. Over the course of having psoriasis, I’ve met a lot of people with various forms of it. You get this weird sense of camaraderie when you meet someone else with psoriasis. You think to yourself “I know what you are going through.” I’ve loved these brief connections with people who have made me feel normal. From my best friend Charlotte’s brother giving me psoriasis cream advice or my advisor for telling me how excited she is for this speech because she has psoriasis too. Hi Ms. Merrill! My fellow psoriasis people help me get through it. It makes me feel less alone, makes me feel part of a bigger community of weirdos. Trinity perfectionists, guess what? We’re all weirdos. We all strive for a type of success no other reasonable teenager could ever think is cool, and we go crazy over it. Let’s admit this to each other, and be weird together. Maybe, it will make us just a little less obsessive.

By the way, my psoriasis is good right now. I only know that because people no longer look at me badly. Zach Targoff also tells me its improved, so you know this must be true. I am still on that journey away from what’s perfect, and trust me it’s hard. It’s hard to feel like my body lets me down, makes me less confident, ruins my day. I want to own my physical differences and to love my body. I’m done letting my body distract from my accomplishments. I’m done letting it consume my own happiness. I’m done with being self-conscious.

Trinity School, be unafraid and unabashed by your flaws. Treat yourselves once in a while. Use a face mask, moisturize your skin, and wear yellow rompers. We can’t expect our bodies to be perfect 100% of the time. We can’t keep training our brains and ignoring ourselves. Let’s listen
to our bodies and to each other. I don’t want to be allergic to idiots anymore and neither do you.

Thank you.