

## “Capthea” Naz Haidarian

*This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).*

**Pronunciation:** kapT Hāuh

**Part of Speech:** Noun

**Provenance:** N/A

**Example:** the musk rose petal billowed in a state of harbored capthea.

The human experience is rife with paradoxes and invented dichotomies: masculine vs. feminine, time vs. eternity, good vs. evil. Nature can help us understand these paradoxical relationships, the coexistence of two truths in opposition to one another, and the experience of time - how we situate ourselves and our experiences within it. This phenomenon came to my attention during one of my daily neighborhood walks. A fresh rose petal trapped under a layer of tan bark caught my eye as it fluttered in the wind, its light pink hue against the variable shades of dark brown. My first instinct was to feel sympathy for the rose petal; I empathized with its powerlessness. But further reflection allowed me to view the incident as a neutral event where there was neither perpetrator nor victim. It is a deeply human reflex to parse every effect through a moralistic lens, my struggle has been balancing the ramifications of this reflex. This observation represented a marriage of several distinct opposites: hard vs. soft, masculine vs. feminine, ephemera vs. the eternal, predator vs. prey, etc. Defining these phenomena as dualistic opposites is a heuristic which we employ to more easily understand patterns but can have the effect, when used excessively or without critical thought, of homogenizing the world into abject familiarity. Capthea mediates these extremes and allows us to meditate on the beauty of paradox. By synthesizing two seemingly extreme opposites, the tension that exists between them is consequently tempered. Capthea is the phenomenon wherein leaves, feathers, petals, hair or any other soft material or fiber gets partially trapped under the weight of rocks, pebbles, tan bark, branches, or any other heavy or hard material.

Relativity is not so much a problem to solve as it is a necessary condition of the human experience. The experience of time can fluctuate to such an extreme even within the understanding of a single individual in a single day, that it can feel nearly impossible to relate to other individuals within our own species let alone different species and life forms. The meditation that *Capthea* inspires can exercise a form of empathy that might be latent within us, expanding our perspective on the experiences of “others” and, for the purposes of environmentalism and humanitarianism, the plight of “others”. These “others” can be human groups (identities or cultures with which we are unfamiliar), human individuals, other species, plants, particles, minerals, et al.. Exercising this form of interspecies empathy and contemplation has far-reaching implications for the efforts and ends of environmentalists. The mental exercise of observing nature and reflecting is a wonderful practice for the mind, body, and spirit but in the context of environmental endeavors, it can also help us refine our vision of a just future, accounting for additional perspectives and interspecies empathy that may not have occupied our consciousness before. It is important to acknowledge that empathy can be exhausting, especially when the increasingly globalized world we live in demands our constant attention for disparate and distant events; compassion fatigue is an alarmingly real phenomenon. However, the ambitions of this concept’s implications are not necessarily to inspire unprecedented levels of empathy worldwide, but to serve as an exercise for envisioning a more harmonious world with ample room for dissonance.

The following is an example of how one might respond to an instance of *Capthea*. A rose petal is trapped under the weight of a nail. My first reaction is sorrow and confusion, I immediately think about the contrasts and contradictions which are now entangled in a despicable embrace. I think of how cruel it is that time weighs on every thing differently: the

rose petal may wither away and fade tomorrow, but the nail will spend several years rusting, then several hundred years disbanding, decaying, then finally erasing its known form from the face of the earth. But how did these two objects each come to be? The single petal was once attached to a single flower which was once a bud on a stem with roots in the soil, and that plant - as a fluid unit - needed to exist in optimal conditions with ample - but not too much - sunlight, enough water, and the proper nutrients which it imbibed from the soil after thousands of years of decay and persistence. The steel nail, an alloy of iron and carbon, was produced in an assembly line using mostly machines - which are also made of metal amalgams. The petal could have been plucked off by a child, blown off with the wind or perhaps it met its natural end and detached itself from the stem. This chain of assumed or plausible events seems to arrive at a few implicit conclusions: (1) the rose petal is ephemeral, (2) the nail is comparatively eternal, (3) the petal's position beneath the nail means it is trapped, (4) the nail is a menacing and predatory presence. These conclusions all exist within the narrow framework of the human timescale, where death is seen as a singular, individual experience. The nail will undergo a process of disintegration too, but on a scale that is perhaps too large for us to immediately empathize with. Its very existence carries the burden of design; it is a human-made artifact, and perhaps our aversion to it stems from a discomfort with that which we have created, the heavy footprints we have left upon the gentle earth. The intended function of the object is relevant, not just any human-made artifact would elicit this same response; the nail is a symbol of industry and infrastructure, an aberration from nature. Ultimately, it is the human expectation and experience of time that informs our understanding of the nail's relationship to the petal. Through a wider lens, both the nail and the petal can be seen as soft, ephemeral entities, since neither are exempt from the ravages and indiscriminate effects of time. In another way, the rose can never die so long as it remains

iterative and continues to evolve. This recalls Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale", wherein he describes the eponymous bird as immortal: "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!/ no hungry generations tread thee down;/ The voice I hear this passing night was heard/ In ancient days by emperor and clown."<sup>1</sup> Maybe, a broader perspective would allow us to envision the possibility that Death is what happens when large swathes of life are snuffed out. Death is species loss, deforestation, genocide, ocean acidification, factory farming. It cuts short the unstoppable force of Life brutishly and prematurely. Then, the above example of the rose petal and the nail can be understood as a reunion: carbon returning to carbon in a momentary embrace before they continue their singular, separate journeys of metamorphosis.

The word itself is used to describe the phenomenon wherein soft materials or fibers get trapped beneath the weight of a hard and heavy object. Of course, soft and hard are relative, and the entrapment does not have to be an irreversible condition. The phenomenon outlined in this definition will hopefully inspire contemplation and serve as a useful conduit for the mind to travel between the known and accepted to the unknown and theoretical. Ideally this exercise will strengthen and flex the mental muscle which allows the observer to tap into novel states of expression and understanding. It can also quell the subconscious tensions induced by an overwhelmingly dualistic lens. Other examples of *Capthea* include: a plastic bag trapped under a tire, a strand of hair stuck to a piece of tape, a chain affixed to a human wrist, a bottlecap floating on the ocean, a leaf between two panes of plexiglass. The aforementioned implications for the efforts and ends of environmentalists lie not in the natural phenomenon captured in the definition of *Capthea* itself, but in the reflection that it induces. Assigning a name to this concept allows us to more easily refer to it, inviting it to our consciousness and discourse.

---

<sup>1</sup> Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale", lines 61-64