

Anastomosis

Spring 2023 *Volume 5, Issue I*

Letter from the Editors

The theme of this issue is “Tensions.” When equilibria are upset, they reveal insights into what it means to be human. Tensions take the parts of life hiding in the shadows and force them into the light, for better or worse. They give situations their stakes. We chose this as the theme for this issue of Anastomosis because of the multitude of tensions that we face in medical education - between action and inaction, spoken word and intended meaning, personal and professional identity, service and sacrifice, and more.

The authors and artists featured this year have faced this theme head-on, with courage and vulnerability. First-year medical student Chenming (Angel) Zheng opens the issue with “Last Breath,” a stunning, visceral painting of the tension between life and death, the opening of an uncertain future amidst a swirling past. Third-year medical student Nirvikalpa Natarajan celebrates the generosity of body donors to our anatomy lab in her poem “The Still Ones,” in which she underscores the solemnity and gratitude of the experience. Second-year medical student Caroline Yao explores the dichotomy of words as powerful and dangerous in “Patient Education.” Third-year medical student Nathan Makarewicz presents a striking collage in “Facial Collage 1,” which examines the history of facial prosthetics and grapples with concepts of completeness and identity. This is just a small selection of the incredible talent and earnest reflection we are honored to feature in this issue of Anastomosis.

In addition, we are delighted to feature the 2022 Paul Kalanithi Writing Award Winners, a contest created in memory of Stanford Neurosurgery resident Dr. Paul Kalanithi, who moved millions with his powerful memoir “When Breath Becomes Air”. The award-winning pieces are phenomenal. They are all evocative works of art that serve as exemplars for the healing and reflective power of engaging in writing and the medical humanities.

We hope you enjoy, and welcome to Anastomosis Volume 5.

/A.nas.to.mosis/

n. A connection between two normally divergent structures. From the Greek *anastomoun*, to provide with a mouth.



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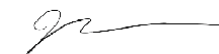
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Last Breath

Chenming Zheng

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Chenming (Angel) Zheng is a first-year medical student at Stanford.

Issue Theme:

Tensions

Wherever the art of Medicine is loved,
there is also a love of Humanity.

— Hippocrates

Medicine sometimes snatches away health,
sometimes gives it.

— Ovid

Maximum Resident Benefit

Nicolas Seranio

What we call "good training"
Is to get dressed in darkness
Realizing your bed
Has already forgotten you
Its shape rebounded
Your warmth
A ghost

It is to watch her sleep
Held by arms of cotton
That never push her away
Or break a promise
A small planet of guilt
Swells amidst your ribs
Knowing that she will only find lack
When she wakes

It can feel like your stomach
Being split open
With want
Its walls sagging to a kiss
Like some sad tent
Unsatiated by the snowfall
Of powdered enamel
Molars pestled with concentration
As you operate

"Good training"
Is picking up your phone as you leave
Finding more work
And less friends
The seafoam drapes of the operating room
Spill out onto the street
Their tide pulling
At your frayed scrubs

Sometimes it's the rumble of your car
As you jolt awake to swerve back into the lane
Wheels crunching free from the dirt
That was almost your grave
Unsure whether you were coming
Or going
This time

"Good training"
Is to care for the man
Who careens into the trauma bay
His brave neck
A disaster of meat and scurrying blood
Cut into the shape of a smile
By his own knife

Because if not for him
I would not know how it feels
To squeeze someone's bare heart
For them

Nicolas Seranio is a fourth-year urology resident at Stanford.

The Still Ones

Nirvikalpa Natarajan

"This is an ode for the gracious people who chose to donate their bodies to the anatomy lab in lieu of a traditional funeral."

Ashes to Ashes
Dust to Dust
This Inevitability
One day, face we all must

Yet we go through life
On the deluded wings of immortality
Unhinged words, callous acts, reckless trespasses
Pretending to close our eyes to reality

We come empty handed
And we will go the same.
Holding onto Grudges, Pain, and Conquests
We can't see, it's all a game

Oh, still ones --you seek no memorials or epitaphs
Though in your silence, you speak the loudest
Reminding me in awareness to awaken
And live a life to my fullest

The ones who lay tranquil before me
I bow down to you with regard eternal
By giving yourselves with the purest intent
Realized have you the essence of life-
Which is ephemeral

Nirvikalpa Natarajan is a third-year medical student at Stanford.

angel island poem 135

Grace Jin

More than 200 poems were carved into the barracks of Angel Island, a processing station in the San Francisco Bay which detained Asian immigrants in the decades following the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. These poems, in Tang Chinese style and other languages, memorialized the grief, anguish, and broken dreams of poor laborers in the mining and railroad industries.

I came across these poems last year while making calligraphy inspired by Asian American history, and compiled more this fall from the Judy Yung archives at Stanford and “Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940” by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung.

Excerpted in this painting: Poem 135: 莫道其間皆西式, 设成玉砌便如籠

“Don’t say that everything within is Western styled. Even if it is built of jade, it has turned into a cage.”

Poem 41: 芳草幽蘭怨凋落, 那時方得任升騰?

“The scented grass and hidden orchids complain of withering and falling. When may I be allowed to soar at my own pleasing? By Lee Gengbo of Toishan”

The physicality of etching characters into wood—its scratchy imperfection, burnt edges, and forceful urgency, felt more honest to the workers’ pain than elegant brush and ink calligraphy did. Moving from Angel Island to other borderlands, thinking about migration, incarceration, estrangement, “a condition of terminal loss” as Said described in *Reflections on Exile*—how desperate is the grasp for beauty in despair; how obsessive the desire to be remembered and understood; how powerful, lasting, and fundamentally human is imagination in the spirit’s fight to survive.

Grace Jin (she/her) is a first-year medical student at Stanford.

Not the answer, but a state of being

Lucy Ma

A howl tears through
hazy silence
There is something derailing

About silence broken
Punctured, Penetrated
Pierced by sudden sound

Like darkness
Punching through light, sour
Cutting through sweet

Your hairs stand on end
“What was that sound?
Did I hear that correctly?”

Surely not
Strange how we give ourselves so
Little credit

Or maybe we just don’t want to admit
that we already know
the answer

A frightful sight
Grown man curled
on the ground, wailing

Dissonance
once again,
thrown off kilter, unprepared

How can someone so much bigger than life
seem so
small?

Anxious hesitancy born out of fear
“Dad – what happened?”
The world died

And you with it.
The world is healing again
Dad is healing

Lucy Ma is a third-year medical student at Stanford.

Though healing can be
fickle,
you did not even get that chance

I used to feel anger
at the injustice
I wanted to fight

Someone!
I didn’t really know who
Incompetent government officials

Kids partying recklessly
God
Anyone would do

We did not even get goodbyes
We did not even get
a funeral

Are you at peace?
Maybe we will never know
Maybe it is not important

What you did
want most for us
is to know peace

Within ourselves—
Not an answer, an
End state, or the ultimate goal

But a state of being.
Whether we choose to fight,
to just move forward, to focus on ourselves,

Or to solve all of society’s problems
Perhaps the most and best
We can ask for, amidst it all,

Is simply
Being at peace



Oil, graphite, & pyrography on wood, 48x32in

Ascension

Shada Sinclair

I made this piece at a time in medical school when I was deeply contemplating what ambition and success meant to me. We are encouraged to always aspire to do more and to be leaders within our fields. I asked myself many times: Is this really what I want? Perhaps I could find joy as a part-time sugar baby, part-time artist? Whether by fate or by coincidence, I started to repeatedly see images of hummingbirds on my Instagram timeline. I reflected on the fact that I had actually never seen a hummingbird at rest in real life. They are always in flight, moving gracefully at frequencies that defy our vision. This stirred something within me and allowed me to find the drive I had not so long ago lost. The process of creating this peace spurred me on to move at my own unique frequency and to aspire to feats that bring me joy and inner peace.



Shada Sinclair is a third-year medical student who stitches colorful dreams and realities.

The seed, the plant, and the bird

Solomiia Savchuk

Was it her root or her leash?
She was pulling on it so hard - one day it gave way.
She swung out into the open,
terrified to look back and realize,
that it was the root,
or the leash?
She flew fast and far,
pieces of her burnt off as she pierced the stratosphere,
so free
so weightless
so lost.
One day becoming a piece of space debris, frantically chasing gravity.
Every planet a desert,
The vacuum numbing her song.
Did she ever fly, or just drift?
Was she a plant? Was she a bird? Was she a seed?
Did she rip out the root that fed her?
Did she tear off the leash that held her down?
Is her cradle now a forest
or an empty nest?

Solomiia Savchuk is a fourth-year medical student at Stanford.

White Magic

Bunmi Fariyike

I put on that white coat
ecstatic to emblazon my name across my chest
in blood-red letters
the color of Covenant
but the most important label was missing
because a white coat possesses a power unlike you
have ever known
have ever wanted

In it
Trembled requests reverberate around me
in the hollows of my egg-white shell
commanding strangers to splay themselves
Eyes fixed on eyes
both unsure of what they will find

In it
The closed mouths of passersby
fall open Thank you
unleash a delude of admiration for your service
that pools at my feet
Drowns my shoes with the weight of the reality
that my fumbling fingers would provoke pain before praise

Without it
I am who I once was
The splayed, not
the splayer
if only there were space to remember
Trust and a
white coat

Given before earned given
before warned
A wonder that taunts me from its dangled dais
reminding me of a service I can't provide
a sorcery I can't yet control

Forgive me. For I knew not
what it meant to
seal fates
into pressed seams
Devil in the details
And etch my name in blood

Bunmi Fariyike is a third-year medical student at Stanford.

Heavy Sleeves

Brian Smith



Originally published in *Academic Emergency Medicine Education and Training*

Brian Smith is a second-year medical student at Stanford.

Patient Education

Caroline Yao

“He’s sarcastic, but not in a funny way.
Great otherwise though.”
The nurse shifts her weight on her feet,
waiting for instructions.
The physician thumbs through the chart.
Pause, inhale, exhale.

The physician walks into the room.
“What can I help with today?”

“I have basal cell carcinoma.”
Stammering, the patient points,
to the dimple in the middle of his forehead,
“It’s my third eye.
Do I need surgery?”
The patient grins sheepishly,
wringing his hands.

With gloves, mirror, marker, and a high-power light,
the physician pries apart the fold.
Pearly nodules beckon
to be excised with a scalpel.

“But, my friend, she drank this juice
With ginger,
And it cured her skin cancer.”
The hand wringing intensifies.
“You see, my sister,
she has horrible facial scars
from surgery.”

Caroline Yao is a third-year medical student at Stanford.

Fear creeps into the patient’s eyes.
His legs start to shake.

The physician nods,
“I understand.
I want you to feel comfortable
with making the right decision.”

“But... doctor...”
Gulp, silence.
The patient shuffles his feet.

“I may not know everything.
But I will try my best
to answer your questions.”

The physician looks the patient in the eye.
Sincerity so intense
it burns.

A gloved hand calms the patient’s writhing fingers,
and his legs stop shaking.
The patient grins sheepishly.

Spoken and unspoken text,
With authority, they can break and shatter.
With empathy, they give us peace of mind.

Just the bright lights

Isaac A. Bernstein



“Just the bright lights” is a piece of mixed digital media. You are operating, fixated on the flesh beneath the sheets. You know the problems and solutions, and delight in navigating constitutional topography. You blood pulses steadily as you inhale in meditation.

But the entity beneath the sheets - what do they see?

When a heart breaks

Sarah Jane Rockwood

When a heart breaks, where does it split?
Where do the seams first start to sunder?
Where do the cracks first start to splinter?

Do the chambers collapse, or do they crumble?
Are they chipped away by their frost-bitten frays?
Do their pulses pound too hard, straining the cells?
Or do they wither to a murmur, too faint to fight?

Do the vessels rupture, or do they start to snap?
Do the anterior arteries rip as they ripple?
Does the great cardiac vein lose its grandeur?
Is LADA the great lavish no more?

Does the circumflex artery lose its trajectory?
Straying into the periled pericardium?
As the aorta descends, does it start to deteriorate?
Does the vagus nerve start to blur, vague and unresponsive?

When a heart breaks, how does it fracture?
Does it bisect or trisect, dissected at the septum?
Does it tear along the tendineae?
Do those choral chords snap for good?
Does it unravel at the valves?
Do they fail to flap, flounder to flow?

Can a suture mend the mangle?
Can a stitch salvage the splinters?
Can a bypass inverse the infarct?
Or is the love-torn tissue beyond repair's realm?

When a heart breaks, is that how it builds?
It's a muscle, after all, this messy mangled mass
This orchestrated palpitation might just be the start
A myocardial muse in the making

Spring Flowers

Humza Ali Khan

They don't tell you that you'll water the cadavers.

It's an ironic ritual: when you water a flower, you expect it to grow. But we water our cadavers to prevent growth.

I've been pondering the paradox for a bit, in between trying to memorize all of the superficial facial nerves, and I think I've figured it out. The ritual marks our own growth.

We've gone from ex-undergrads to knowing some semblance of how the body works—for the sake of our patients.

All that at the behest of the hands of our

cadavers. I hope, with today, our appreciation for the cadavers grows too.

These hands felt love and hate. They kissed their children and grandchildren. They made the choice to let us learn with them. Their final choice.

So thank you for our cadavers. May our practice be all the better for them.

Our practice to help our patients to kiss their grandchildren, to learn, to love.

Our practice—remembering the human in the patient. And today, we remember the human in our cadavers. Showering us with knowledge, watering us—making us grow.

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Antigen as a Lover

Humza Ali Khan

CD3 beckons

Tasting lovely scary things

Will I find my match?

Humza Ali Khan is a first-year MD-PhD student who romancitizes science and scientizes romance.

Facial Collage 1

Nathan Makarewicz

20

The face is arguably our most visible feature and is a central part of our identity, communication, and expression. It is easy to take normal facial appearance and function for granted, but when the window that frames how we interact with the world is damaged, the consequences can be devastating. Unfortunately, those with facial deformities understand this psychosocial burden implicitly.

This work is a collage of individual linoleum prints, each of which is based on a facial prosthetic made during World War I. The unprecedented trauma of World War I greatly increased the need for reconstructive solutions to war time facial deformities. While this period ultimately served as an inflection point for the developing field of reconstructive plastic surgery, initially it was classically-trained artists crafting facial prosthetics who provided the only solution for soldiers with facial injuries. At the time, physicians and artists worked together sculpting and painting tin prosthetics by hand to recreate a soldier's face. Despite this level of care, these masks could do little more than cover gross anatomic defects.

This collage uses these historic facial prosthetics to grapple with the universal concepts of completeness and identity. The inorganic and incomplete source materials used to reconstruct this face highlights the contrast between living flesh and the masks once sculpted to mimic it. By juxtaposing hollow, fragmented masks with the composite human form they create, this work attempts to illustrate the human toll associated with facial trauma.



Nathan Makarewicz is a third-year medical student at Stanford.

Phoenix Rising

Christine L Xu

Note: "I wrote this a year ago, as a second-year medical student who had gone home to live with family during the start of COVID. I recently re-visited this poem, dusted it off, cleaned it up, and decided to publish it as an ode to the trials and travails of the past year."

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Any random
amorphous
morning,
so similar
indistinguishable
from the last:

I am dead
inside,
the last ounce
of hope
of strength
of mental will power
was spent
reviewing lecture notes
on
angina heartaches
and myocardial rupture heart
breaks;
was spent comforting friends
happy yesterday
mourning today;
was spent
doing dishes
cleaning the kitchen--
if I don't, my over-worked
dead-tired
parents will.
In class,
I learn heart sounds,

they pound
in my head.
I step outside,
let burning eyes
take a break
from my unforgiving
computer screen,
let the sun kiss
my face,
relax

my shoulders,
let birdsong,
wingbeats
drown out
abnormal heartbeats.

Heart sounds,
murmurs
of the human body,
the crescendo decrescendo
of aortic stenosis--
paradoxical splitting,
they call it.

Well I
too
am paradoxically split
between:
being beaten down

with hopelessness
helplessness--

only a med student
no role to play
just study hard
maybe I'll help one day

--and being reborn
with invigoration
and newfound
strength.

But rest assured
my arsenal of knowledge
grows slowly
but surely,
my mental weaponry
accumulates
in size
and strength.

By next
pandemic
or
come what may
I will
be poised
and ready
to fight.

At the time of submission, Christine L Xu was a third-year medical student at Stanford.

Cafe Babel

Peter Alexieff

22

The shock of warm air coats my glasses with condensation as I rush into the café. Somehow the northeast winter has gotten even colder. My first day on the job and, of course, my overpriced coffee maker remains tucked in one of the cardboard boxes that currently serves as my apartment decor. Wiping my dewy glasses, I settle into the line. As my vision returns, I realize this café is a bit unusual. For one thing, the walls are lined with books. Not bookshelves, books. They are stacked haphazardly from floor to ceiling, with smaller stacks piled beneath the tables too. The tables themselves are carved out of a dark wood. Their surfaces are mirror smooth but the sides and legs are wrought with various geometric patterns. The person in front of me, features disguised by a bulky black hooded jacket, shuffles forward. My ears, still stinging from the cold, haven't heard any orders yet. In fact, the only thing I can hear is the clacking of typewriter keys. On each table sits at least one typewriter. To my inexpert eye, no two look alike. For a frantic moment, I imagine I have wandered into a bohemian art collective that only resembles a café ironically. Fortunately, then I spot white porcelain cups filled with coffee, set beside the clacking typewriters. The patrons, one and all, are working on some project or other. Turning forward, the dark jacket is no longer in front of me, but I have not seen them seated amongst the other customers either. In the jacket's place stands a stern looking man, narrow face framed by a mane of black curls shot through with gray, staring at me over an enormous mechanical cash register.

"What'd you like, sir?" he asks, words oozing with boredom.

"Uh, an americano, black," I mumble, "please." Without responding, or even changing expression, he presses a series of buttons that unleashes a cacophony of grinding gears. Raising my voice over the din, I add, "To-go, please."

"To... go?" The syllables roll around his mouth and drop out like marbles. Punctuating his confusion, the cash register chimes and the till slams out. The typewritten pages inside jostle and nearly scatter out.

"Yes, like with a paper cup?" I say while miming holding a cup, somehow thinking that would increase his understanding. I've never heard of a café that didn't have to-go cups, but maybe this cashier was new.

That gets a reaction out of him. A sad expression flickers across his face.

"That's not how we do things here," he replies. "Your total comes out to," he glances at something on the register, "1,000 words of short fiction."

"Excuse me," I ask, disbelieving, "how much for my americano?"

"Ah," he says, his bored tone untouched by that momentary sadness, "a first-timer." Coming around the counter, he gently grabs the elbow of my jacket and guides me to a table. My feet move out of a misguided sense of politeness. He pulls out a chair and I fall into it. Facing me is a bright orange typewriter loaded with a single page. "At this café," he continues, "you pay with words."

I have barely enough time to stop for coffee. I glance towards the exit. Or where I thought the exit was. I'm confronted by four walls covered by stacked tomes. While messily stacked, there is no evidence that the books had fallen over the entrance. Am I still –

“No sir, you are not dreaming,” interrupts the dark-haired man, “and, no, I can't read your mind.” Somehow, he sounds... rehearsed. I have never realized what it was like to feel like your jaw hit the floor until that moment.

I sit in stunned silence. I must have stumbled into some elaborate prank game show. No hidden cameras in sight. Of course, they wouldn't be. The slight thump of porcelain on wood adds just enough normalcy to quell my rising panic. “Here you are, Mr. Jones,” says the cashier before hurrying back to the register. Holding the cup and smelling the aroma of freshly brewed espresso

snaps my reeling mind to the here and now. The warmth seeps into my hands and the first sip singes my tongue. Dark waves of espresso rise, fall, and still as I blow into the steaming cup. The next sip is bitter, but sweetness darts through like jokes in a eulogy.

Even in this bizarre café, caffeine works. The remnants of blariness melt away. The click-clack of typewriter keys fills the air, punctuated by the occasional clang as the carriages rush backwards across paper. Placing my fingers on the keys, I notice that somehow the machine has been set to a comfortable position within my arms' reach. Feeling the faint outline of the letters press into my fingertips, and having no idea what I am doing, I begin to type.

The shock of warm air coats my glasses with condensation as I rush into the café...

At the time of submission, Peter Alexieff was a fourth-year medical student at California Northstate University College of Medicine. He is now Dr. Peter Alexieff, MD, a first-year resident in child neurology at Lurie Children's Hospital in Chicago.

A Woman with Three Kidneys

Nadia Kirimani

Renal failure
was the explanation.

She is a petite woman in her sixties
silver hair shorn down to the skull,
golden skin dulled by death to a paler countenance.
We weren't given a name for her, just a number
She is Table 9.

My first day
I unzip the plastic blue bag,
pull back the beige fabric
covering her length to the navel.
Stillness hangs between us,
a claustrophobic finality
one which cannot be commemorated long
before a voice urges me to begin,
and so I do.

It doesn't take much force to open our bodies
My scalpel meets your skin,
fascia, thin layers of
gloopy adipose
I take my time,
discard them in the biohazard bag
between your feet.
Starting at the thorax, down to the abdomen, then the pelvis
-
you have a kidney in your pelvis!

My professor exclaims over the teaching moment
So it's not a uterus? My teammate mumbles.
We learn that in the embryo,
kidneys developed in the pelvis for their blood supply.
Medicine, I think, has a way of returning
back to the beginning.

A single kidney has a million nephrons
Blood vessels freed,
I hold that statistic in my palm
Three million nephrons
If I could, I would ask you –
How did it feel? Was it different than before?
Or maybe what I really wanted to know was,
how could that not be enough
to sustain you?

Months pass
before I see your face,
and the first thing I notice is
your eyes. A gelatinous ring of blue.
I know it may sound absurd but
when I muster the courage to look directly in them,
you say you've known what was to happen all along.

It is now our parting day, and
what I want to say is this -

Before I met you,
I hadn't known our vessels could tell stories
how the source of pain we carried
persists after death.

Perhaps the way we learn is by sharing with others
that which we harbor inside of ourselves,
reflecting on past pain to better handle
what we will meet in the future.

Nadia Kirimani is a first-year medical student at Stanford.

Weathering

Ada Zhang

The weeks surrounding the winter solstice have always felt particularly tender for me, like a bruise, a sludgy stasis of blue-black-green-purple simmering underneath my paper skin. The ache that runs through my body is a reminder of simultaneity: of life and death percolating beneath the fallen leaves at the feet of barren trees, of my father, of the procession of family members who departed in the years after he did, of the passage of time circling back to my birthday this month, of endings begetting beginnings.

I believe that our bodies tend to somaticize the ancient wisdom that shorter days and longer nights are signals to ease deep into the soft, slow, slush of wintertime. It is a season to sleep, and dream, and integrate, and metabolize. I wonder if there is an interplay between my innate reactions to the chill of winter and my molten memories of this season in years past. The slumbering glow of the winter sun offers me the wisdom of potentiality: I feel that it is becoming more possible for me to unravel the dual, tightly-wound knots of grief and joy that bind my ribcage to my clenched heart.

This year, grief looms particularly large. I think it is because I am in the center of so many things: I am in the center of my mother's hometown, in the center of my grandparents' home, in the center of my grandfather's room, for the first time since his death. The maw of this place I used to (still? will?) embrace as a child feels like it may swallow me whole, tendinous beating heart and all. I feel like an overripe

persimmon, flesh held together underneath a fragile membrane, a fistful away from splitting open. I feel like I am sinking into the center of my grief, an ocean-worn rock trying to balance somewhere along the ghostly tightrope that connects my sternum to the arch of the crescent moon. I am trying to breathe all the while.

I remember the last slow moments I spent with him in this room. Sitting with our knees almost touching while his dialysis bag did the work that his kidneys could do no longer. Listening to him weave stories of his youth in his creaking, leathery baritone. Balancing my phone on the arm of a chair from the dining room so I could archive the timbre of his voice.

He was a man of such few words. Words were a gift, and he offered them more readily as I got older. My grandmother, on the other hand, felt like a kind of yang to his yin. Words were also a gift from her, but they had flowed freely ever since I can remember. My grandparents had matching smile lines.

My grandfather had never struck a particularly imposing figure, but each of the intervals between my visits seemed to render him into smaller versions of himself, like wind wearing away at desert sand. During that last summer together, I remember cataloguing the minute movements of the bones and tendons in his hands and wrists, a microcosm of canyons and valleys, carved and re-carved with each gesture. I remember gathering sweaters from underneath the

stacks of boxes in his closet so that he would have some options to choose from whenever he felt cold, which was nearly every day. I remember guiding him by the elbow to a nearby shopping mall so that we could get a few links removed from his favorite watch.

I still have the recording I made that summer afternoon. The audio is distorted by the whirl of the aircon contending with the slick press of Chengdu's humidity, and my grandfather's voice fades in and out of focus, his volume undulating with the ebb and flow of his diaphragmatic effort. He runs out of energy to speak while he is telling me about how and why he and my grandmother fell in love with each other.

Grief feels like time. It feels like this city that seems to seep and ooze and gelatinize into unfamiliar molds while I am away, a collection of freeze-frames I am still learning to piece together into a coherent storyboard. It feels like home-seeking, a restlessness between oceans, the slow fade of storefronts gathering dust, the re-learning of my mother tongue I undergo each time I return.

Grief feels like an untethering from the story about

myself and my family that I was finally beginning to verbalize, one that has now become a re-mapping as I learn to navigate without the magnetic impulse of true north. I wonder what it means to take up space in my ancestral lands when my anchors to familial history and generational wisdom are no longer moored to the waking realm.

Tonight, as I watch the condensate of my breath mist away and disappear, I am reminded of the steam rising from the bowl of dumplings I had for lunch at one of my grandfather's favorite restaurants. The meld of water through all its phases mirrors the steady assurance of seasons: I am realizing that though summer has been on my mind, all around me is the tangible presence of winter, and I should attend well to both. And it is here, perhaps, that I have found a knot-edge to undo. That despite the inevitable weight of uncertainty, there are truths that persist, imprints of my grandfather and of other dearly departed loved ones that offer answers to questions I have not yet begun to ask.

Grief feels like the sun slanting through the rows and rows of ginkgo trees outside, their yellow wings spiralling into careless heaps on cars, roads, sidewalks. And I am trying to breathe all the while.

Ada (they/them)
is a healer and writer.

Ophelia

Chenming Zheng



"My works explore the tension between matter and spirit. The chaos within the human figures spills from the confines of their physical bodies and saturates the background. "Ophelia" and "last breath" represent the feeling of drowning in distress; the subjects struggle as the murky water swirls around them, slowly pulling them deeper into turmoil."

Chenming (Angel) Zheng is a first-year medical student at Stanford. Her other piece, "last breath," is on page 1.

For the love of sunflowers

Shada Sinclair



Shada Sinclair is a third-year medical student who stitches colorful dreams and realities. Her other piece, "Ascension," is on page 7.

The Suitcase of Dreams:

Carrying the Legacy of Ecuadorian Elders to
Build Resilience, Fight Injustice, and Grow Above Adversity

Sofi Vergara

To think that 18 years of my life fit into one suitcase of 50 pounds packed by the family I would not see anymore. Where do you pack your fears? What to leave behind, and how to make room for the new and enticing American dream? On the day I left my home country, my suitcase carried the most precious cargo of them all: the dreams of the mestiza and indigenous generations before me, those that sacrificed everything for one of us to have a chance at economic stability and freedom of thinking. Here is the story of how I carried the lessons of my Ecuadorian elders to become a woman in STEM, an activist, and a future physician in a country that did not always welcome me.

Lesson one: grow in resilience by building community. No posters hanging from the wall, no bed risers to make the room feel bigger. My college dorm, the only space I had some right to in America, felt empty and sad. Proud parents roamed around the dorms settling their kids in while I regretted the day that I thought I belonged here. This was something more than a trip to Target could fix; because despite my efforts to feel at home, there was the evident lack of money that impeded me from even decorating my room. That feeling of being forced to stop your dreams just because there are no resources became my nemesis from day one. Although that feeling strained me in the physical world – my dorm stayed ugly and empty for several months– it fired me up intellectually and spiritually to show the world that I couldn't be stopped. But money and resources can be limiting, and

time-consuming to pursue. It was only in the despair of my homesickness and food insecurity, in the midst of failing classes, that I decided to reach out for the help of other low-income students. Only then I understood that building a community was the most deliberate action I could take when agency had been stripped away from me. But when you have been put to the test multiple times, and everything seems to be against you – how do you crack down those walls that kept you safe? I learned to strip away my tough skin because the most valuable relationships I built were not based on how strong I could be, but on how vulnerable and in need I was. The resilience that we, minority students, build not only helps us navigate our careers, but it uplifts others around us and creates strong communities where we flourish despite our struggles.

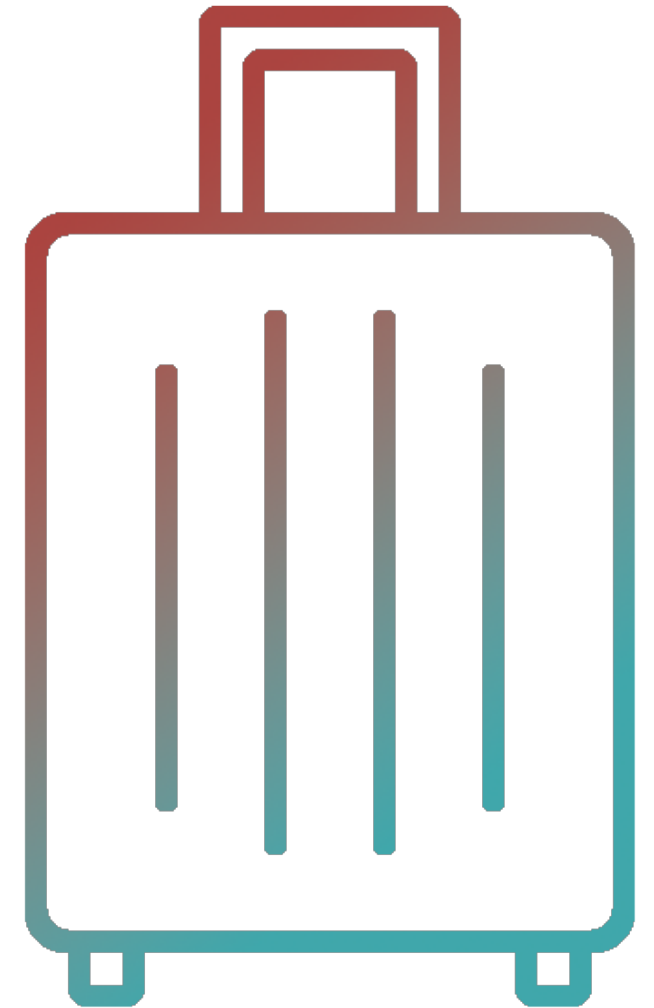
Lesson two: use your voice to act on injustices. Multiple days had passed since I developed a dry cough. With no urgent clinics around the area, I tried to push through. In my case, as for many other people that face health inequities, a treatable disease turned into a threatening medical situation. I will never forget my first time in an emergency room in the US. The intense lights, and the cold corridors. Although I was privileged enough to understand and speak English, I couldn't stop worrying about the cost of my treatment. I even found myself pretending to look better in front of physicians, so they didn't have to hospitalize me. I couldn't afford missing

The Suitcase of Dreams

work. Even then, I understood the medical opportunities given to me are oftentimes denied to many immigrants who are not insured and face language and cultural barriers. That is why I've decided to use my privileges in service to others. As minority students we have a superpower, one of relating to communities in need; we understand their herbal medicinal practices, religious traditions, frustrations with the immigration system, and their experiences with food insecurity and homelessness. We minority students have the superpower of acting for them, with them, because we are the future of medicine, future physicians with a life purpose centered on rebuilding the trust of marginalized communities in the healthcare system.

Lesson three: choose to grow even when things don't work out. To be an international student is to be a second-class citizen. I didn't have a say in the jobs I could take, the loans I could sign up for, or even the medical schools I could apply to. So how do you compete when the odds are already against you? How do you love this country when it does not love you back? You choose to grow above all else. You embrace the culture that raises you, you take advantage of every opportunity given to you, and most importantly you surround yourself with people that believe in you. In your life, you will come across people that see your spark, that believe in your talents and strengths. Hold these people close to your heart, and nourish these relationships because they are indispensable in our fight against systemic racism and health inequality. And please, shut the doors to the haters and the doubters, because they are not prepared to see the change we bring to this country.

If there is one thing you must remember from today, it is that we minority students are forged to be defiant, to stand up for what we care for, and to bring our communities along the way.



Sofi Vergara is a first-year medical student at Stanford. This piece is a transcript of her speech delivered at a conference for minority students in prehealth.

Asim

As a child, Asim always wondered why he couldn't touch light. By the time he was a teenager, he had multiple scars crawling over his knuckles--indicative of his proclivity to pass his fingers through open flames. His mother likened his nature to that of a moth drawn to the last living lamp in the house before everything became opaque with the dense night.

Asim stands in the doorframe of the hospital room, observing the shadows cast by Asma's cheekbones. The bulb situated behind her frizzy hair casts a ring of brightness over her forehead. The same light darkens the thickness of her eyelashes and contour of her nose, which otherwise appears as a soft smudge on the center of her face. She tips her head back in a muffled groan, but Asim does not step out of the doorframe. He continues watching her.

When she begins to shift in the bed with more urgency, he moves to her side. In her fists are handfuls of the bedsheets; she doesn't release the fabric from her grip to touch him. He decides not to touch her either.

Asma. He had loved her name ever since the day he first heard it. It reminded him of the Urdu word for sky. Before they got married, he would spend hours holding her photo between his fingers, thinking about the open, expansive, empty sky. He thought of the lantern sun and the mirror moon on a cloudless day. He thought of them both sharing the same sky.

Now, claustrophobia overcomes him. They are situated in the darkest wing of the hospital, it seems. Windowless and lightless. The room is not small, but Asim feels as though the four corners have been pulled into the center like a tarp. He feels none of the sky. Asma attempts to shift her weight on the bed, his name on her lips, Asim, Asim, Asim. He doesn't realize how quickly her pain escalates, but soon, she is shrieking. He wordlessly rushes outside of the room to find the doctor.

Dil

He prays with his eyes open. Because he lives by himself, he says his prayers aloud. Dil knows that this isn't what most people do. He knows that 'normal' people pray with their eyelashes resting tenderly on their cheeks, and he knows that people whisper their wishes to God in an intimacy he doesn't care for. Keeping his eyes open makes no difference anyway, and saying his prayers, enunciating every

syllable, makes him feel less alone. The volume of his conversation with God is enough to keep him company.

He bends down to grip his knees as he recites some of the portions of the Quran he's got engraved in his mind simply from practice. He knows he shouldn't be distracted, but he almost hears his father's voice in his head, saying the words with him. The moment is sacred—and he wants to stay there. He repeats the motions and exhausts every Surah he can think of; lips moving and moving and moving.

In a sense of finality, he nudges his forehead against the tip of the velvet prayer mat and pauses. He can feel the warmth of the sunshine pouring on his back as he stays in this position. He whispers to the ground, so quiet that he can barely hear himself. Pinpricks of sensation overcome his eyelids, and he blinks repeatedly at the floor. He feels wetness slide down his skin; the droplets create streams on the curves of his face and eventually come together and pool at the junction where his two lips meet. He doesn't know why he is crying.

Asim

By the time the doctor comes, Asma has broken into a sweat. The misty sheen on her skin makes her look almost ethereal-- somewhere in between human and divine. Asim reaches out and gently takes her hand and places it in his palm, expecting the places where their skin touches to begin to glow. As he smooths her hand on his own, she gives him a transient look that makes him forget that fear exists.

When they had first found out that Asma was pregnant, Asim had cried. He remembers kissing her neck and smiling till his cheeks hurt. It had been the happiest day of his life.

Now, he watches the doctor methodically splay open Asma's limbs, like a spatchcocked chicken on the table. This was the first time Asim had seen her so lifeless, like a body of dead cotton. Asma's fragility isn't meant to endure hours of labor and complications, he thinks to himself. He uses his knuckles to brush the wet hair from her forehead as she releases soft, exhausted grunts. The encouragement from the doctors in the room sounds like white noise to him. He continues to let the gravity of his wife's presence captivate him as the moment that would change his life unfurls before him.

He almost misses it, the final push. He watches her chest rise and fall like the crests of tides he used to watch as a child. As she lets out a final whisper of a moan, Asim watches a puddle of peach and apricot

sharpen in the corner of his peripheral vision. The first cry doesn't register in his mind, but the first look does. His son. His son. His son. It is his son.

Dil

Dil thinks it is to his benefit that he never saw the world in the first place. He thinks that if he had, he would have certainly fallen in love. Then, he would have known what he was missing all along.

When Dil was a child, his father took him to his first pottery class. There, he engaged his hands, shaping the wet clay into vessels that stored his mother's favorite flowers. He quickly grew bored with pottery, though, and asked his father if he could pursue sculpting instead. The first person he sculpted was his mother. He had spent hours brushing his hands over her face to feel the contours of her features. He made gentle strokes under her eyes, over the bow of her lips, and where her ear met her face. When he worked with the clay, it was as if he had been practicing his whole life. Like water taking the shape of its vessel, the clay shifted to the mold of his mother. He could not see to confirm that he had gotten it right, but it felt perfect.

Behind Dil now sit blocks of unformed clay, dried from being left outside. Uncared for and uncreated. He thinks about the way his fingers used to move in his youth, the way he used to be able to create beauty that could be felt. He misses the tactile and agile nature of his own hands--the same ones that lay on the prayer mat as he cried, limp with sadness. He sits there for a while, reminiscing.

Asim

His son emerges from his wife like the last lick of a dying flame on a lantern. He is small and delicate like a drop of morning dew. Just looking at him makes Asim scared to hold him. He thinks to himself, I can never run out of love.

Dil

On the prayer mat, Dil perches with his legs crossed but elevated. He has been sitting in this position for longer than is evident to him. As he sits, a heaviness starts blooming in his chest, as if there is a weight placed there. His breathing changes pace, and the tears stop coming. He closes his eyes, and they press hard on the back of his eyelids. Memories of the smell of clay, the crow's feet at the corners of his father's eyes, and his mother's voice after seeing herself immortalized in his creation start to resurface. He wonders if he is dreaming.

Dil holds out his palms to the sky and then brings them to his face to cup his cheeks. He knows what is coming but does not feel afraid. As he feels his spine losing strength and his mind losing consciousness, he lets the heaviness in his chest consume him. His forehead hits the edge of the prayer mat. He releases a final, whimpering breath. The way his body curls, he looks as though he is peacefully sleeping.

Asim

As Asim delicately walks toward the crib that cradles his son, he has the urge to present himself in a more raw form. He lifts his hands up and disrobes himself, laying his threadbare shirt next to his wife's bed. He wraps his fingertips around his premature child, letting his thumbs swirl around the baby's shoulders. He looks at him with an adoration that spills from his face. Asim brings the baby to his chest, placing him just below his collarbone. He lays the baby's head against the skin that thrums with the deep beat of his heart. He can feel the vibrations echoing between them.

The doctor had warned Asma about the complications before their son was born. He was developmentally not ready to face the world. The doctor had said that the little veins that supplied the discs of his eyes were bursting, or broken, or not there-- Asim does not remember which. He knows though, that his son cannot see light. The doctor had told them that their son would be small; that he would be a weak sapling for most of his life. His guts were twisted together like knots and his lungs had grown with leaks. But Asim did not care. This was his son.

Asim brings his son to his lips. "Dil. That's your name. I will call you my heart." The name came to him at once, like a wave of electricity. His name, Dil, means heart in Urdu. Asim knows his son will have the biggest and strongest heart. He knows that he will see the world with his heart instead of his eyes. With this, he repositions himself to be able to talk to his child in a cherished bubble that no one else can breach. Asim begins reciting the Adhan, the call to prayer, in Dil's ear. As the child is surrounded by the divine melody, he closes his eyes and falls asleep.

Henry Nguyen

Whether I was walking into my MCAT testing center or donning my White Coat, my path to medicine has been filled with endless warnings of Imposter Syndrome.

“You belong here, Henry.” “You’re THAT DUDE, Henry.” “Stanford ain’t ready for someone like you, Henry.” These are all texts that I consistently read to myself to ensure that I had a steady supply of ego boosts during my first weeks of medical school. Why? Because that should have stopped the Imposter Syndrome from forming, right? I just had to constantly remind myself that I’m good enough, right? I just had to internalize the fact that nobody’s perfect, right? After all, that’s what all of these papers, experts, deans, etc. are pinpointing as the source of Imposter Syndrome: the thought that we’re not good enough for medicine. The belief that we somehow fooled numerous admissions officers with decades of experience to accept our beautifully polished application over thousands of others.....When in reality, we’re imperfect humans who sometimes can’t even recognize the seemingly perfect person we presented on paper.

If these feelings of self-doubt were truly the core of Imposter Syndrome, why then – did I feel like I didn’t belong in medical school only a few days into MoFo? Why were the phrases of affirmation I was getting from others and myself not enough to protect my self-confidence? Why wasn’t my Imposter Syndrome getting better as I passed my classes and aced my Anki cards? Because for me, the question at the core of my Imposter Syndrome wasn’t “Am I good enough for medicine?” It was “What if I’d be better at something else outside of medicine?”

Because here at Stanford Med, we’re not “just” medical students. We’re *Stanford* medical students that all have some crazy *Stanford* thing that we did to get in. Whether it was co-founding organizations, competing in the Olympics, serving in the Special Forces, obtaining a PhD, or switching from a completely different career path altogether, everyone here at Stanford Med is leaving behind a proven history of success in “something else” to enter the great unknown that is training for a career in medicine. We are dealing with the ever-present **tension** of wondering what the true reason behind our acceptance was. Was it due to other people’s awe at our past accomplishments or was it due to their belief in our future ones? We are constantly being bombarded with stories about

how medicine “just isn’t what it used to be” and wondering..... What if we put all of this effort into tech, business, etc. instead? How different and potentially less stressful would our lives be?

These are the thoughts that run through my mind as I skip class to finalize a six-figure deal for one of my organizations. These are the questions impossible for me to silence as I struggle to write a Radiology textbook chapter after logging off of a videogame studio meeting that energized me beyond belief. This is the stimuli that overloads my prefrontal cortex with endless action potentials when someone asks, “What are you even doing in medicine when you’re so good at [blank]?” during networking events.

In my opinion, this is a crucial piece missing from our efforts to address Imposter Syndrome: acknowledging this **tension**. This **tension** that can easily pull promising future physicians away from a system in desperate need of repair. However, this same **tension** can also spring them forward towards creating the change that they’ve worked so hard to see. Because we need physicians who understand more than the science of medicine. Who understand that healthcare extends well beyond the walls of a hospital or clinic. Who understand that we need to do more than just provide patient care if we want our patients to achieve optimal health. We need people who are “better at” things outside of medicine to create the best possible future for medicine as a whole.

As I re-read the supposedly excellent AMCAS application that got me into Stanford Med, I became inspired by the vision of my future that I laid out and the immense optimism oozing out of my words. I reminded myself that my past achievements are indeed impressive, but I chose to enter medicine because I desired to create an impact that I couldn’t outside of it. I chuckled loudly as my past self beautifully described how my passions outside of medicine would make me an excellent future physician because my present self was having difficulty connecting the dots. After all, I came to Stanford Med to combine my many passions together and create a completely new “something else” for me to become better at.

Imposter Syndrome is something that will always exist, and I know that this piece of writing will likely do nothing to reduce it in the long run. However, I hope that it helps make others feel seen and recognized because I highly doubt that I’m the only one who feels

of my future that I laid out and the immense optimism oozing out of my words. I reminded myself that my past achievements are indeed impressive, but I chose to enter medicine because I desired to create an impact that I couldn’t outside of it. I chuckled loudly as my past self beautifully described how my passions outside of medicine would make me an excellent future physician because my present self was having difficulty connecting the dots. After all, I came to Stanford Med to combine my many passions together and create a completely new “something else” for me to become better at.

Imposter Syndrome is something that will always exist, and I know

that this piece of writing will likely do nothing to reduce it in the long run. However, I hope that it helps make others feel seen and recognized because I highly doubt that I’m the only one who feels this way. I don’t believe that I’m the only medical student who feels Imposter Syndrome even when being showered by compliments about our potential as future physicians. Because the core of this feeling goes beyond just questioning ‘Am I good enough for medicine?’ It’s questioning whether our “something else” is truly compatible with a career in medicine.

Henry Nguyen is a first-year medical student at Stanford.

Two-Faced City

Vongai Mlambo

I stealthily weave through the bodies around me that are practically gyrating against each other. Even at this proximity, I do not find any evidence of the 2 meters the newsman keeps singing like the chorus to a song everyone is tired of listening to. I will never forget the night he first came on air with his pursed upper lip and authoritative glare as he looked right at us. Mai had cried that day. She hadn’t cried quietly. It was one of those yelps you would hear when they are beating a dog – sharp, crisp and full of sorrow. On the other side of the walls, I could hear the scratch of the neighbors’ ears as they pressed their heads firmly against the cool, corrugated metal dividers that separated each homestead, eager to acquire gossip that could be sold in the market for a meal or two.

I secretly wish I could sell some gossip too. After all, it made big money fast, and I could use it to stop my mother from crying so much. Yet, she would never accept goods bought with dirty money. I wanted to tell her that poverty and morals are an unnatural pair, like trying to mix oil and water. They can co-exist, but only to the exclusion of one or the other. The rush of annoyance boiled my blood and I found myself shouting the prices of the phones I was selling louder than I intended. Usually, Mai comes to sell here alone at the bus rank while I clean up our house in strict accordance with her instructions. The sun chases after her in the morning, only catching up once she has unfolded her table, written prices in her sloppy script and sipped some two-rand tea from the vendor who

has a crush on her. With one swift mandate from the South African government banning all hawkers from public spaces, my mother was evicted and told she would be put in jail if she tried to return. Yet, this mandate only affected a few hawkers, particularly those who couldn’t run fast enough when the police came, raving mad with sticks in their hand and empty guns tucked into their holsters. The aged and the meek stayed at home, while the young and the nimble could continue to prosper, as long as they pricked their ears a little higher than normal and widened their eyes to detect officials. That’s why I was here today with all these people who reeked with the stench of a hard day’s work and the need to keep moving. Mai could not run if police broke onto the scene, but I certainly could.

Arms sore from holding up the cell phones no one seems interested in purchasing, I settle onto a bare, brick ledge and take stock of the sprawling mismatch of a city unfolding below me. High rises and conference centers flanked by dark spots reminiscent of moles festering on unblemished skin. With my fingers, I blot out the moles, imagining that this is what it must be like to apply concealer. Under my index finger was the mole that belonged to me, or rather, the mole I belonged to.

The glaring sunlight reflects from the high-rise glass paneling and obscures the growing shadow of a figure walking hastily in my direction. Normally, people in the market have no qualms about

Two-Faced City

invading your personal space, because no one owns anything, not even the air passing in and out of their lungs. The idea of such a circumference even existing is laughable but the sickness has made people more cautious, encouraging a brief, but noticeable double take before they cross any invisible thresholds.

The figure takes no such pause, claiming my personal space as his own as he fashions police cuffs around my hungry wrists with his bulging thumb and middle finger. His skin raw, reminding me of the time I fell off a bicycle and grazed my knee to the bone. It healed unevenly, with flaps of tough flesh barely dressing the wound. A scream gurgled in my throat, but my street smarts secured a firm hand against my mouth. Instead, my eyes searched frantically for the women selling fruits nearby, but they were either deliberately ignoring me or too engrossed in their little radio to notice.

“Mfana, what are you selling?”

I expressed my displeasure in being called little child by baring my teeth, now more angry than cautious. The old man did not pause for my response. Instead, he lifted the bag I kept the merchandise in and extended his eyes into the opening. His evil grin gave away his plan, yet, I was still not fast enough to stop him from sprinting away from me with my family’s livelihood in hand. There was a joy in his jog that mocked the emptiness in my eyes.

The women I had tried to implore for help finally caught on to my daylight robbery. They all stood up at once in synchronized shock. One took several dramatic steps in the direction of the man’s shadow and threatened the wrath of God on his back and his progeny. The other held her hands up to her head which was wrapped in patchwork of blue, yellow and green cloth. Her lips, oiled with globs of Vaseline, took the shape of a grimace and she made guttural sounds of pain to commiserate with my loss. The last woman, the most practical of the three, started to gather their belongings, drawing them closer into her peripheral vision. She shifted the metal tin box holding that day’s meager earnings and re-organized the remaining produce with the most appetizing side up. I was a lesson on carelessness, and she would not be a failing student. She shrugged as if saying ‘what’s done is done’ and leaned back into the radio.

I nodded my head towards the women to thank them for their performed solidarity. Conceding defeat, I sank back onto my brick. This time, I was gazing into the bowl of my hands weighed down by

my head, devastation leaking from my pores just as much as sweat. I did not cry, although no one would fault me for shedding a few shameless tears. I refused to give my thief the satisfaction of taking any more from me. I would find out that contrary to my belief, the thief had not only taken but also, abundantly given.

It was like the time there had been a lice outbreak in the township. Sneaky, translucent bugs had hopped from head to head with no indication other than incessant scratching by the children. Both boys and girls would run away when their parents suggested cutting their fingernails because it would preclude satisfactory scratching. Children having sleepovers united families of lice, so that both species were having a party. Normally the Department of Health Services would not have been too concerned with the localized issues of a township that was causing a little discomfort. Although the children would disagree with ‘the little’ part, including me. Indeed, if it weren’t for Qiniso, we would have continued to suffer, scratching until we bore holes into our skulls.

Qiniso was a brain. He had won a scholarship at 6 years-old to attend the prestigious private school: St. Joseph’s Preparatory. In his dapper blue trousers and executive-level collared shirt, he would walk five kilometers to the bus stop just on the edge of Sandton to avoid offending the other children with the contradictions between how he lived and how he schooled. At home, he shared a bathroom with ten people. At school, he could sit in the stall for as long as he wanted without anyone ever asking him to leave. He ate like a king at school so that at home, his brothers and sisters could have a few morsels to stop their stomachs from digesting themselves. Only Qiniso and the bus driver knew the truth, and they both would have taken it to the grave.

When the lice attacked, the truth could no longer remain hidden. The distressing creatures dove into the TRESemmé-shampooed hair of Qiniso’s classmates - a nutritious incubator. It didn’t take long until three entire grades were found cohabitating with lice. Only then did DHS come to shave our heads and dip them in lice poison. We held a funeral for the lice that weekend with the remaining body parts we scratched out of our heads.

Just as Qiniso had inadvertently shared his microscopic friends, the thief had shared his own kind with me. They had leapt from his thumb onto my wrist. Crawled their way into my mouth as I rested my head from the burden of losing the month’s earnings in one day.

Two-Faced City

They were swimming in the phlegm that comes up when you cough in the winter, with its ugly yellow tinge and its thick, wobbly composure. The mutual friends we now shared swam effortlessly, wafted along by the downward curves of my throat, squealing with joy like a child on a waterslide. If I had been listening carefully, I would have heard them bumping into a floating piece of debris in my nostrils or temporarily stuck on a flap of skin. They had moved in, and I hadn’t had the chance to show them the begrudging South African hospitality for when visitors show up uninvited.

Unaware of my visitors, I did not make the appropriate preparations. When the Grandma sitting next to me on the way back home opened her packet of homemade peanuts and offered it to me and then all the passengers, I did not think twice about digging my hands into the thin plastic. My fingernails eagerly grazed the grains of salt swimming at the bottom as I took out a fistful of peanuts. All I could think about was the adamant squeeze in my shriveled stomach. Maybe if I had known, the customary washing of hands would have overridden my primal instincts.

The bus was lively at this time of the day. The money collector sat near the door of the kombi, directing the endless two-way flow of traffic into and out of the vehicle. If you blinked too slowly, you would miss the quick exchange of passengers at each bus stop and end up with a new stranger next to you, rather than the stranger you had become somewhat more acquainted with. The strangers would regretfully give up their fare, adding to the wad of curled-up bills in the collector’s fist, dusty with years of circulation in unregulated markets. There were probably visitors on those bills too.

A young boy-man sat on the warm engine, shifting his weight often so as not to get scorched by the heat of the revving van. The possibility of getting your buttocks burned off meant that you could pay half the fare. There was another overlooked benefit. The engine-sitter also escaped the usual practice of cramming humans into the kombi like they were slivers of tuna in a can. Shoulder to shoulder, everyone breathed heavily in unison, windows closed to keep out the lacerating wind whipping Johannesburg, but also unknowingly making our tuna can an efficient breeding ground.

After an hour and a half, the sliding door finally opened to reveal the poorly lit road curving into my neighborhood. I relied on my other senses for navigation. When I heard the dramatic shouting of Nigerian soap operas, I knew I had passed Auntie Kito’s home with its immigrant nostalgia. I would take the right turn and be affronted

by the acrid stench of burnt cow intestines made by Uncle Jabulo, who missed the delicacies his dead mother used to make him. The problem is, he had no business or skill making them on his own. The charcoal aroma meant I was only a few meters from our house and sure enough, at my door, there was always the waft of fresh laundry and fervent gospel music in the background.

Inspired by the music, I whispered my own prayer as I faced Mai with no bills in my pockets or phones in my hand. I didn’t even need to explain. She could extract the whole story from the way my head was bowed towards the ground, my body contorted into the shape of a question mark.

“Go wash,” She sighed. “Dinner is almost ready.”

I scrubbed the day off of my body with the vigor of a new maid trying to make a good impression. When the dirt trickled into the drainage, I thought I saw something unusual, but Mai’s impatience left no time for analysis. I quickly toweled off and went to eat dinner in somber silence.

The following week, Mai and I were watching T.V. in the evening after a long day of trying to be breadwinners at a time in which no bread was being baked.

As cases continue to ravage Johannesburg, we have reports of an outbreak in several townships in the southeast of the city, including Soweto, Tembisa and Sanguve.

It was strange to hear the name of our township being uttered by the woman on the T.V. with her garish pink lipstick and formal black blazer. She wrapped her lips around the names of our homes as if they left a bad taste in her mouth.

Contact tracing is difficult to conduct because of the density of these ‘residences’ but officials from the Department of Health Services have promised that they are strategizing on how to control the outbreaks in these townships so that they do not exacerbate the pandemic that has affected the lives and livelihoods of millions of South Africans.

I couldn’t help but smile. I wonder which one of us in the township had pulled a Qniso this time?

Vongai Mlambo is a third-year medical student at Stanford.

Through Their Eyes

Freja Ekman, Bunmi Fariyike, Niisoja Torto

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There's a part of the story of patients and their families that we often struggle to capture in healthcare. We can't find it during our history and physical, and it's not revealed by lab values or radiographic images. It's a **nuance** that can only be conveyed by patients and families themselves.

Over the course of several months, we partnered with pediatric patients between the ages of 4 and 18 and their families at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital to learn about their experiences with healthcare – **through their own eyes**.

In giving these patients a camera, we asked them to capture the parts of their hospital experience that were most meaningful to them. We asked their caregivers to do the same. At the end of the experience, we interviewed families about the photos they took to understand why they took it, what they saw in each photo, and what they hoped other people would see in it. We are honored to share with you what our partner families had to say.

As burgeoning medical professionals, we spend so much of our time learning from who we consider to be experts. Professors, scientists, doctors, nurses: these are all people we typically associate with the type of infallible wisdom upon which we hope to build our own careers. But these photos and quotes remind us that sometimes the greatest wisdom comes in small packages and the most important lessons from simple words. It was our honor to be able to stop and listen, and we hope that we have given you the opportunity to do the same.

Freja, Bunmi, and Niisoja are part of a larger team of graduate students who put together this project to give pediatric patients an opportunity to play and express themselves through photography. If you are interested in supporting their work, please contact them at pediatricphotoproject-bounces@lists.stanford.edu



"[When] I got discharged, it was kinda hard to walk from my room to the stairs, so I wheelchaired over there, and I climbed up the stairs."

What does this picture tell us about your life?

"You can always achieve your goals."

- J. (age 10)

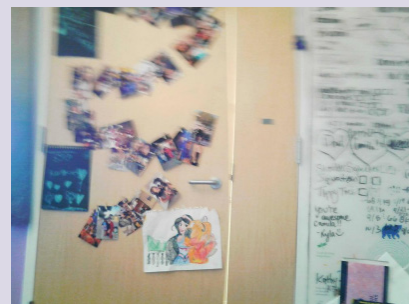


"[This photo] is a really cool cactus tree that was trying to lean towards the sun ... It has tons of spikes along the trunk, and it made me think **how brave it was and how it kind of was like me.**"

Yeah, what does that mean for you? Being brave?

"It was surviving its life, trying to survive its life."

- E. (age 10)



"[I] drew like a really nice heart. It was almost a perfect heart, and I wanted to keep drawing more, because **I was just very happy with my parents being here.** Because, you know, not a whole lot of patients have parents that they can see almost every day. Some people do, but they're not always here. So, that's why I have three hearts that have my dad and then me and my mom"

- C. (age 10)



"This is the first time that I got to wash [C's] hair after surgery. And I think this was over two weeks after surgery. We had washed it in the bed once, but I just was dying to like get in there, like clean her head and like to take care of her. It feels...you can feel really hands-off in medical situations, especially when she was so fragile. With the pacemaker situation I couldn't, I couldn't get her out of bed. **I couldn't hold her, I couldn't do all these things.**"

- S. (parent of C, age 10)



"This [monkey stuffed animal] is my stress buddy. Like, if something is hurting, I just squeeze him... I get very cold during dialysis"

What lessons can we take from this photo?

"**If you're at dialysis, wear a blanket.**"

- B. (age 14)



"This photo was the first day that I could eat in a very long time... being a foodie, it's very hard not to eat because it's one of the things that makes you really happy ... I watched the Cooking a, not only because I want to get better at cooking, but because, you know, I also [had] a lot of faith that I'm going to eat something like that someday again. And [this] picture kind of proves it ... **Don't lose faith, foodies.**"

- C. (age 10)

Still Life (sutured)

Adela Wu



“Still Life (sutured)” portrays a familiar situation for medical students as a surreal piece. Early in medical school, I developed interest in surgery as a career. Senior students and resident mentors encouraged me to practice knot-tying and suturing as preparation for my surgical clerkship and sub-internship rotations. I collected old needle drivers and expired suture packets, using chicken cutlets and various fruits—oranges, bananas, grapes—to zealously practice my interrupted stitches, running “baseball” stitch, and vertical and horizontal mattresses. Using mixed media, including collage and embroidery, I sought to create a whimsical ode to a fundamental skill all medical students learn and to the concept of “practice makes perfect”.

Adela Wu, MD is a fifth-year neurosurgery resident at Stanford.

Paul Kalanithi Writing Award

Paul Kalanithi was a physician writer and neurosurgery resident at Stanford University. In the final years of his training, he was diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer. His memoir, *When Breath Becomes Air*, beautifully chronicles his reflections on living with illness and the meaning of legacy. The Paul Kalanithi Writing Award was created in his memory.

1st Place: *Sick Girl Goes on a Date* | Alyson Lee

2nd Place: *To Sit With* | Brian Zhao

3rd Place: *What That Poem was About* | Fiona Miller

4th Place: *I Wear You Like a Memory* | Nicolas Seranio

Honorable Mention: *Junk Journal* | James Hyun Lee

For my first date as a sick girl, I wore a black shirt with ruffles that exposed my midriff and a pair of expensive jeans borrowed from my sister-in-law. I felt pretty. I practiced giggling in the mirror because I was afraid I had forgotten how to smile.

They say you shouldn't talk about anything traumatic on a first date but we had not even finished our appetizer before I told him that at age 20 I had a stroke, I lost function of my fingers and legs, I had a worm in my eye and got de-wormed like a horse, and I am slowly losing vision in my right eye.

I had meant to tell him the cute version, that I had had a stroke and it was "crazy." But he never interrupted and looked at me without pity so I kept telling him more. I said, "once a month I get lasers burned in my retina to kill cells that are trying to attack me." I said, "at one point they thought I had cancer, but no one had the heart to tell me." I said, "they never figured out why this happened." And I laughed the whole way through, with a few well-timed self-deprecating jokes, watching him carefully to see if he laughed too.

I said, "Well yep. That's my shit," and looked at his eyes, the hands in his lap to see if he was anxiously picking at them. But he looked me in the eye, without a note of irony, and said "I guess what I can say is, you're incredible."

*

I can say then that other things happened on this first sick-girl date. He told me he read Pilgrim's Progress three times cover to cover and I laughed and said, "that's hot." He asked me what my favorite basic science class was and I said, "Cell Biology." The C-train was late so we took the 1 and he told me when he was little, he played Schubert at a recital and an old, dying lady in the crowd was so moved she bought him a baby grand and paid for his piano lessons until she died. And I laughed and shamed him for not playing piano now when this lady had died thinking she had found the next Mozart.

And because he dropped me off at my apartment and said, "When can

I see you again?" the first sick-girl date became a symbol, a memory to signify the moment when I realized that I had told him everything and he didn't run away, that you could tell someone you have broken blood vessels but they still desperately want to know why you think N-linked glycosylation is so elegant.

*

The next day he sent me a picture of his finger, freshly cut from a kitchen knife, wrapped in a band-aid with a smiley face he drew on with a pen. He called his bandaged, smiling finger Rex for "Right Index" and sent photos of Rex accomplishing various tasks throughout his day.

I told him that I named the hypothetical parasite in my optic nerve, Edworm, and said "we are basically the same."

*

I guess you could say I was ecstatic but I could not help but be worried. Because I had found the first boy to say, "I'm thinking about you" after my body had fallen apart and I did not trust myself to know whether he really liked me or just liked taking care of me, whether I could call this love when it was really sympathy.

///

One time, my dad stood up when Dr. J suggested a new medication after the first one failed. My dad said, we won't do that, and pulled me from the room.

Later, when I asked why, he said the drug causes infertility and miscarriage. I thought about all the pills I had swallowed and whether I had unknowingly killed my first born child.

And that meant I had to ask myself questions about babies before I had even had sex. Questions like, what would that mean to me? If I could not have children of my own, would I feel incomplete? If I had a baby with my partner's DNA but not my own, would I feel jealous? If I could not have children of my own, would he leave me? If I could not have children of my own, could I say I am really a woman? Or must I say I am always a girl?

After I missed my period for 6 months, my OBGYN said it doesn't look like I'm ovulating right now. I did not want to ask her whether that meant I was not able to have a baby because I did not want to think about these questions.

I wonder if by the time I am brave enough to ask, it will be too late.

*

In my darkest of thoughts, I can say I am glad. Because I wonder whether this illness I have is heritable and if I would just be giving birth to a broken baby. I can say I am relieved because I do not want my baby to resent me.

Sometimes, though, I picture myself in mismatched pajamas, a t-shirt from college and gingham thermal pants, and my head is in my hands and my hands are in my hair, pulling, and my hands are on my belly and they are pressing down on my belly button trying to feel whatever it is that is empty and cold.

I pre-mourn the disappointment. Because it will be another way my body has failed me. Except in this case, it would fail a lot more people than just me.

Sick Girl Goes on a Date

Alyson Lee

Sick Girl Goes on a Date

Because in my picture, I am always alone and I know it is because we had tried but it was too much for him to bear, because he had not pictured his life to turn out this way, and even though this is the 21st century and he told me I am more than my birthing body, he leaves me for a woman with wider hips and greater follicle-stimulating hormones.

Sometimes, though, I picture the moment after the doctor tells me bad news, when she tells me the days I have left. I

picture what it would be like to sit my children down and tell them, mom's not doing so well anymore. And I mourn the wails I will not hear and the words of comfort I will not get to say.

I do not even know if this is something I have to mourn. But I am too scared to find out. So I just mourn what I do not know, waiting for the day I do.

2nd Place Kalanithi Award

To sit with

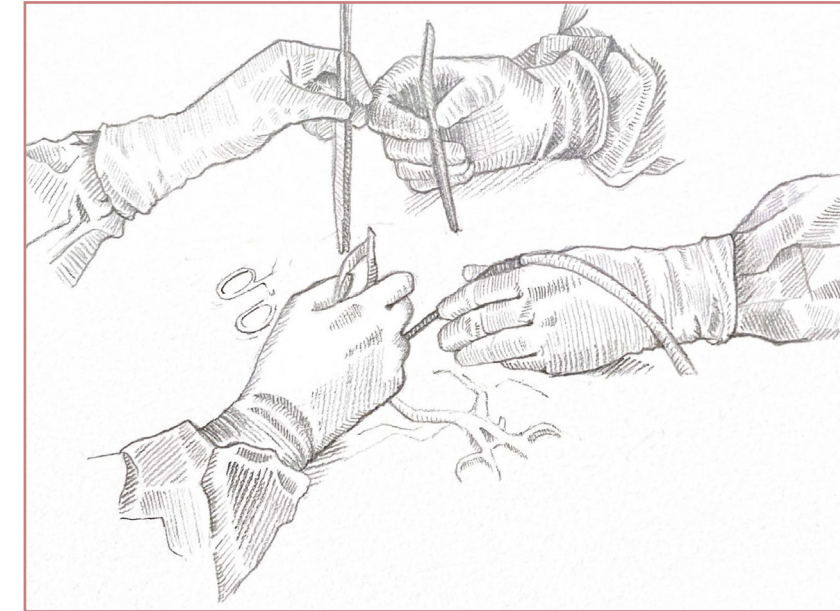
Brian Zhao

They couldn't get a clean cut, that space between abdomen and gut-feeling. A year to live or four—they cannot say. You are incandescent with unknowing. How hard it is to be human in the thrown shadow. Like everyone else, you once dreamed of falling asleep forever. But even this peace eludes you now. What can I do but sit with you.

Uncle, at night you had no teeth. Your tongue stuck out like a parched nub of sunflower. What did we talk about during those hours, when there was only my crisp American and your gum sounds and the soft slur of electricity. Perhaps at the end you knew enough, my touch unfelt against your swollen fingers when I asked you to wake up and the machine cried out.

Mentorship

Adela Wu



Throughout my medical education and residency training so far, I've been indebted to my amazing mentors. They have taught me invaluable clinical and doctoring skills. They have imparted their wisdom with patience. I especially recognize the great degree of trust mentors have in us trainees. We cannot learn how to do procedures—or, indeed, how to become doctors—without their guidance and their willingness to step aside for us to learn. “Mentorship”, therefore, highlights this incredible and important relationship with two surgeons’ hands working together on a procedure. With subtleties apparent in body language and the pictured surgical instruments, the sketch illustration aims to portray a mentor, who allows the mentee to take an active role.

Adela Wu, MD is a fifth-year neurosurgery resident at Stanford.

What That Poem Was About

Fiona Miller

My mother in her blue flannel nightgown shuffling down the hall, dragging her left foot like a block of wood behind her. Squinting. My mother's soft body in and out of the sarcophagi of MRI machines, objects falling from the hands she thought were clenched. Words like numbness, blindness, scarring, scared. My mother on the toilet seat holding a needle long as her middle finger, diagram of a faceless body showing her where. Forty, with a walker. Saying my MS, my MS, like it was a thing that belonged to her. And me, in the middle school courtyard with my friends, saying words like sick, brain, autoimmune. Me, in the spoken word workshop at writing camp with the only poem I ever wrote about disease. Me, on the stage beginning too fast and the teacher saying Stop. What is this poem about? Making me say it. Me, swallowing. Commanding the tears to stay back. And behind me my classmates, against the wall, knowing, each of us clutching our losses like they were the last things in the world we owned.

I wear you like a memory

Nicolas Seranio

They tell me I have my father's face
But I know my features belong to my grandmother
They belong to Shirley

Our faces are round
With a glassblower's cheeks
All orbiting a bulbous nose

Sometimes I like to imagine them
Back in their home of Kingston, Jamaica
Sniffing the char of roasted breadfruit
Or savoring the last morsels of curry goat and callaloo
Before they dance down her throat

The same throat they find the mass
A time bomb of flesh
That leaves no room for boiled dumplings or beef patties
Only liquids

My parents pulverize her food down to the atom
Made unrecognizable
And her face follows
She is all angles now
As islands of bone emerge from the receding fat
Her sunken cheeks an offering bowl
I had never felt her ribs until we hugged for the last time

I learn of her passing on my way to the operating room
And I let myself shatter briefly
Before promptly returning to work

I intend to schedule my grief
As I know she must have
Between the pummeling of her husband's knuckles
And the whimpers of her three little ones
Between working every job at every hour
Only to cut her feet on shattered glass
After Oakland robs her once again
I know that grief is a luxury

I carry her face to her funeral
And even soggy with tears
It stirs the souls of all who know
Every crease a lyric
Every smile a eulogy

What a gift
To carry this legacy and to comfort others
With this face

Junk Journal

James Hyun Lee

DAD – *a photograph of his father dressed in hanbok, beaming at the son in his lap. An empty mini-can of diet ginger ale. A final hospital bill.*

On your first date, he told you about how Joel died. Queer dating is just exchanging equal parts pleasantries and trauma.

He told you how he could not remember much about his father. For some reason, the memories of Joel were inaccessible, so his brain simply remembered around Joel – the fizz of saccharine soda, the stale air of a shared hospital room, the vermillion scrubs of nurses who checked his pulse more and more frequently. Five years old is a terrible age to lose a father.

He told you how when Joel died, he inherited the diagnoses. The month after Joel's death, he was doubled over with abdominal pain and was stamped with type 1 diabetes. Years later, he would start hearing voices, and because of “family history,” he was express shipped a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

Two for two. A rough combination. He asked if this was a dealbreaker. You said you've had much worse. It's true – you have.

Several dates later, after he sneaked you into his place and showed you the frames on the wall, he pointed to the photograph of his doljabi, the Korean tradition of setting objects in front of the new one-year-old and seeing which one they reach for. A prophecy of sorts. A calligraphy brush representing intelligence, a stack of coins promising prosperity, a gavel signaling a just nature.

He ended up choosing the spool of thread. Longevity. His parents were overjoyed. Finally, a son who could break the family curse of dying young.

SEX ED - *seven unopened condoms way past their expiration date. A sticker that just read "WET AND WILD!"*

You were his first kiss. And everything else too.

High school barely taught sex ed, his father was dead, and his mother was a fire-and-brimstone Baptist who believed that he was too damaged to understand what sex was. He was not going to be able to pick up on cues for consent, his voices would make unreasonable demands, he would not have impulse control, he would be too forgetful, his paranoia would explode.

Your rebuttal: he deserved pleasure too. You suggested rules, created easy tap-out systems, crafted some codewords. You reminded him over and over that his diagnosis should not exclude him from the human adult's right to feel good. Oftentimes, he would decline when he felt paranoid or angry or empty. But when he was feeling like himself, usually off at least one of his meds, the sex was fire.

NANCY - a pocket New Testament. Twenty-seven birthday cards in chronological order, the first half in Korean, the latter in English, all of them with her exquisite penmanship.

He reflected frequently on the cruel fate of being the only child of immigrants. Gay, schizophrenic, and feisty – none of which were ideal traits of a Korean successor. Every time his mother looked at him, he flushed hot with shame, the feeling that she crossed an ocean just for him to be sick and depraved with unsustainable dreams of becoming a baker.

You first met Nancy five years ago under her roof, where he labeled himself as gay and you as his boyfriend. She did not know

that you had slept over that night, nor did she know that this had been going on behind her back for the last eight months.

Her eyes narrowed, reining in her biblical rage and sorrow. You were a predator who took advantage of the weak. You were seeking out frail souls to drag into drugs, to further fracture a shaky mind. You took joy in corruption.

You forgot how hot homophobia felt. You briefly considered if hell were hotter.

Later, she pulled him aside, attempting to convince him that his “gay thoughts” were just a part of his illness too. It was another one of his delusions, and he needed to snap out of it. Maybe Risperdal would help.

You were so proud of him when he said that if being gay was part of his psychosis, he wouldn't dream of letting any of it go.

THE VOICES - sizable chunks of his lower left incisor in a small Ziploc.

He had named the two voices in his head, but he refused to tell you their names. He worried that by telling you, they would materialize as the full-fledged bullies/conspirators he felt them to be.

You ended up learning their names when you walked into his room one day and he was curled up in bed whispering for them to stop. Crying. Panicking.

You ran to the kitchen and prepared a bucket of ice water for him, one of his most reliable coping tools. Something about how dunking his head activated a “dive reflex” that caused his heart rate to slow down. While white-knuckling the bucket back to his room, you heard the sharp crack of bone biting into the elm bedpost. The tooth was shattered.

Later, he would tell you how the voices were overwhelming, and he did the only thing that came to mind to shut them up. You

wished you hadn't run for the bucket.

You hated how Nancy's gaze sizzled through you after that day. You had always been able to old your own against her. But her eyes humbled you, asking if you could really handle him, if you deserved to be there at all.

INHERITANCE – his first lottery ticket, a losing one. An unopened Father's Day gift.

He always hated the idea of “losing the genetic lottery.” What kind of lottery is one where most people win? It was easier to envision his schizophrenia as a curse, one that he resented Joel for passing on. His father knew what it was like, so how could he create another human to suffer just as he did, repenting for the sins of a tainted bloodline?

When he was feeling particularly worthless, he saw himself as a mere echo of his father. The multiple suicide attempts, the complications of missed insulin doses, the fast-tracked decay of his kidneys, his already-cloudy vision.

He swore he would not become his father. He would live longer, celebrate harder, never forget an anniversary or birthday. You sometimes wondered if he was doing something to spite Joel rather than by his own motivation, and then you wondered if there was a difference.

COMPROMISE – the envelope that Nancy gave you a year after you met her. An old medication schedule.

She grew to appreciate you, albeit begrudgingly. After all, when his paranoia kicked into high gear, you were somehow always exempt from his ire. You were able to convince him to go to sleep when he was feeling out of control and drink water when he wasn't feeling thirsty. You drove him to his appointments when she broke her arm. You corrected the grammar in his culinary school application essays. You gave them the breaks away from

each other that they deserved. She hated your queerness, but eventually had to recognize you loved him as passionately as she did.

Yet there were days when you were her antithesis. She urged him to take his meds. You let him take holidays when he felt like a zombie. She prayed with him every day, clasping her hands around his. You left prayer behind a long time ago when it was used to banish your gay away. She pushed others far from him - they could never understand him wholly. You pushed others towards him – they could learn a lot.

She thought you were the devil, you thought she was a kook. He agreed with her, he agreed with you. He needed both of you. He needed the opposition to keep him intact. And as much as you resented each other, you achieved some semblance of synergy to avoid breaking the boy down the middle.

WOOD - five pieces of tree bark. A gay anniversary card with two stick figures in top hats holding hands.

He had insisted on coordinating the entire date. It was going to be a good day. The voices were under better control. He felt normal. Excited, even.

He had decided on a scavenger hunt as your anniversary gift. Each stop had a clue to the next, accompanied by a treat that he baked specifically to get you to reminisce. A mini strawberry cheesecake at the H Mart where he introduced you to strawberry Pocky. A biscotti at the Home Depot where you kept on making jokes about “hard logs.” A mochi at the local Japanese stationery store because of that time you almost ate the erasers thinking they were filled with adzuki beans.

The final stop was the ponderosa forest near his house. A wobbly panna cotta. He asked if you trusted him. You did. He tied a blindfold around your eyes, and a small, stupid part

of you wondered if this was how you died. You heard him walking around and scraping bark from the trees, building a pile of the bark next to you. The vanilla scent of the ponderosa filled the entire clearing, enhancing the palate with every bite of the rich cream.

“I wanted to make you a dessert that was as dynamic as you are to me.”

You never expected that a Tinder date would lead to a wooden anniversary. Later that night in your bed, he made some terrible joke about how wood and tinder were actually the same thing, and you slapped his shoulder in faux annoyance. In retaliation, he kissed you and tickled you and embraced you so warmly that you couldn't finish your thought about how crazy it all was and how quickly it could come crashing down.

IDENTITY – a shard of the bathroom mirror that he shattered five years ago when he thought someone was spying on him.

He had always been skeptical of who he was as a person. Were his voices a part of him, even if they quieted on Abilify? Was he always a paranoid person, or was he a person underneath a schizophrenic facade? Was he the good obedient patient who took his medications or the rebel hero who faced his symptoms head-on? How many layers of his surface did he have to peel back before revealing who he truly was?

He then turned to you and asked which parts of him you loved and which ones you could leave behind. You told him you couldn't separate those things, so why bother trying. He pressed you for specificity. You stayed vague.

You couldn't imagine him without his schizophrenia. He would be less himself without it. You also hated the illness. It sometimes took him away from you. But on rare occasions, it

enriched him – made him more sensitive, thoughtful, intense. It was not a cancer that could be resected, not a cut that would scar over, eventually paling from both vision and memory. You accepted the whole package because you needed all of him.

JUNK JOURNAL - a dresser filled with forty-nine boxes of various sizes and shapes, each box wrapped in twine and tagged with an index card labeled with silver Sharpie.

"DIAGNOSIS" "CHEF'S KNIFE" "THROWING HANDS" "NEGATIVE SYMPTOMS"

He loved mementos. Holding something familiar and summoning the memory back, making sure that it was real, that it happened.

Nancy could not tolerate the mess. Honestly, neither could you. The clutter from one-punched punch cards and colorful bobby pins and the disintegrating bag from his first Five Guys burger and dust bunnies and loose jokers made his room a minefield. So, a compromise between everyone. He got to keep some of the mementos, but they had to be organized in some way and fit into his dresser. Throw everything else out.

You helped him clean his room so that he could at least see the floor, but it was his idea to group the objects by theme. He found small boxes and containers throughout the house, squirreling each of the objects away with a label in all-caps.

Now that he is gone, you go through each of the boxes and take in the contents. You're familiar with some of them. Some of them are about you. Objects you never thought he'd notice or keep - the napkin from your first date, an empty bottle of your scented sunscreen, the wig you loaned him when he tried drag for the first time (Nancy was livid).

It hits you that this was his way of saying goodbye. Just in case.

FINALE – a secret between the two of you.

He always talked about his death, trying in his quirky, anxious way to prepare you. He knew his illness could sweep him away without warning. DKA, car accident, hanging, overdose, getting lost and starving to death. Every grotesque catastrophe.

He tried breaking up with you three times to save you the trouble. He urged you to move on, to feel relief more than sadness, to leave his sorry ass to die alone. He made you promise you wouldn't grieve, and he knew your promise was a lie.

He thought you wouldn't be invited to the funeral. Christianity had its limitations. You were shocked when Nancy told you the time and address, but you couldn't muster the energy to go, to be surrounded by the people from her church who pitied him, who prayed for his psychosis to be quelled by God's omnipotence, who knew him only from Nancy's paternalistic lens. You couldn't watch him be flattened into some sick kid to mourn. You politely declined, and she nodded with understanding and perhaps the slightest twinge of an apology.

In the case that he died before you could say goodbye, he left a space for you to fill.

You kiss the box you made for him, its contents neatly organized inside. It feels heavier than it actually is. The Sharpie on the index card is fresh as you place your box, the fiftieth, into the dresser. A nice even number that he would have loved.

You close the drawer. Take in the room around you. Set the keys on the desk. Breathe in the lingering wisps of gochujang and vanilla and apricot and the generic laundry detergent that reminds you there are clothes to fold back home.

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