

LIFELINES



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GEISEL SCHOOL OF
MEDICINE

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SIGNS/SYMPTOMS

LIFELINES

VOLUME 12

*The Literary and Art Magazine of the
Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth*

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about **lifelines**

Lifelines is a print journal for literature and art in medicine. The journal was founded in 2002 by Sai Li (MED'06) and established with the publication of the first issue in Fall 2004. Subsequently, the journal was published annually. Lifelines has featured work by Guggenheim Fellows, winners of the William Carlos Williams Poetry Competition, physicians, patients, medical students, faculty, and undergraduates, as well as from new authors and artists. The journal is open to all.



Dartmouth
GEISEL SCHOOL OF
MEDICINE

THE OFFICE of
**DIVERSITY, INCLUSION &
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

*To Sai Li, MD
Writer, healer*

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foreword

To Our Readers:

This year's Lifelines edition represents SIGNS/SYMPTOMS, an inside-look at the fundamental operating paradigms by which we both provide and experience medicine. Medical providers observe signs about people that indicate specific health or disease states. Contrarily, symptoms represent our bodies sending signals to us about our health or disease states that we ultimately interpret as feelings. Together, the art in this 12th volume has yielded a diverse set of motifs from patient, provider, and student perspectives that create the theme SIGNS/SYMPTOMS. Ideas explored within the journal include aging, depression, cancer, mortality, hope, internal struggles, and our society's continual grapple with COVID.

The following works were curated in late 2021 and carefully selected by our reviewing committee based on quality, creativity, originality, and relevance to the theme. This edition is particularly special because we curated our submissions primarily from the Dartmouth community and from those who have submitted to the journal within the past few years. If you are a past reader of Lifelines or a part of the Dartmouth community, you may recognize many of these talented artists. We have included a section at the end of the journal that contains brief biographies submitted by the authors. Please enjoy this special edition of Lifelines!

Sincerely,

Eren Veziroglu, Greg Suralik, & Alice Liu

Editors

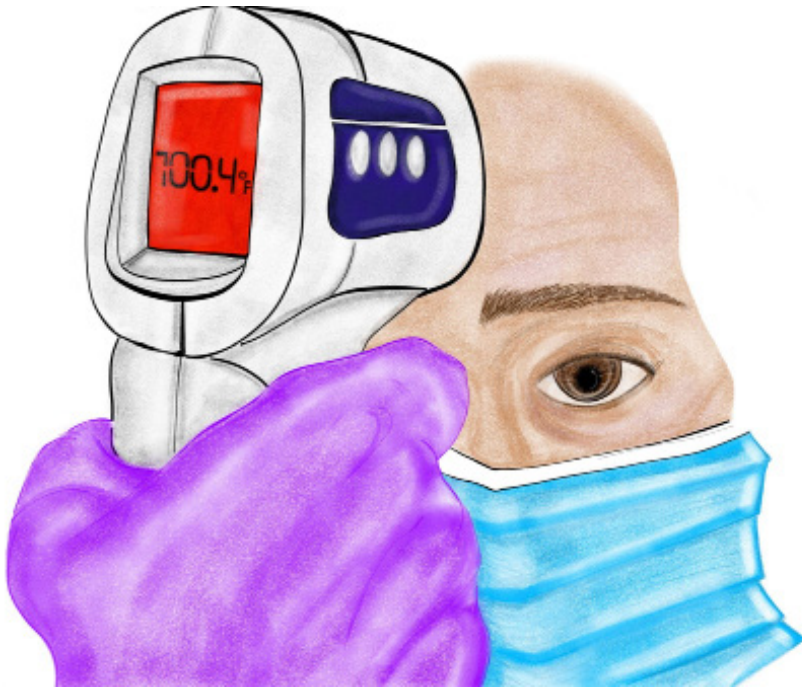
Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth, Class of 2024

LIFELINES

a long journey

Trevor Canty

“That’s not terrifying at all” the stranger muttered to no one in particular.
I unwrapped the N95, red in the face, not knowing how to finagle the horizontal straps. Pinched
nose and wrinkled eyelids
The one my mom mailed me—early March 2020, a watershed moment
In the airport bathroom, automatic sink automatically still running.
I felt contagious
Took it off twelve hours later, lines visible on my youth
Still waiting for them to fade



Artwork Courtesy of Krista Schemitsch, *Temperatures Rising*

A Textbook Case

Melissa Huddleston

Sitting on the exam table in 3D
Seemingly unaware of the severity
Of the symptoms which she reports to me
Having lost weight unintentionally
The fatigue she describes rather casually
About the lump in her neck she has some worry
But my concern is to a higher degree

As I present her symptoms I already know
The differential that stands in the first row
Though I hope the doctor will give a veto
To the diagnosis that will be the worst blow
For the patient who may have to undergo
Treatment that will leave her frail and hollow
To reach the beast within the marrow

Do I begin mourning for her now or wait?
Am I being rash in assuming her fate?
We walk to her room carrying the weight
The weight of a knowledge that nauseates
Constricts the lungs as they try to inflate
And causes the knees to quiver and shake
This most noble art I sometimes quite hate

This living, breathing textbook case
I wish to fold up, return to its place
The positive symptoms I want to erase
From this sentient vignette clearly misplaced
But she's here, she's real, she's waiting with grace
To hear what diagnosis she might face
In the race to the end, how fast is her pace?

A Consequence of Weather

Donna Lee

At the bridge
of my nose is a balance.

I could put fruit on it,
apples on one sides,

oranges on the other.
One falls,

sends an impulse
over the trigeminal

nerve to cascade into
the brain, and soon

the balance has dug
into my nose and

pain is a threshold
crossed, a dam of

nausea breached;
saliva thickening,

sickening; light, an
assault; the mere

sound of footsteps
a hammer to the head.

I know the barometric
pressure's lowering,

taking my head with it.
I wish it were steady always,

that the flow of my blood,
likewise, remained the same
and a stream of well-
being enveloped the cells

that have over-fired,
that have mis-taken

the signs of a simple
change of weather.

Bye—Polar Complaint

Al Salehi

I remember something and yet I don't.
Maybe. Did I do it, or was it just
a dream? In the dream, I remember some
places, but never the faces. I've slight
sight of the crimes but never the times. *Help
me!* I'm innocent. I think. At least by
reason of insanity. I mean I
must be if I'm talking to myself. *Right?*

What if all of this is just a part of
an overactive imagination?
Perhaps these are the deleted scenes from
a picture on the silkscreen. *No!* I must
turn them off: the crazy theories and the
ideas. Perhaps it can be done with
medication. But do I really want
it off? *Might it drive me mad knowing I
can't go mad?* If only I knew the truth.

For the life of me, I can't remember.

Sundowning

Gina Logan

I've been walking for hours, but I don't dare go back to my room just yet. After dinnertime I will be stronger. I can say to the ghosts: go ahead; go your worst.

It isn't that I'm afraid of the ghosts; I'm not. I've gotten used to them. It's just that they sit there, they sit there in my room, their mouths opening and shutting, opening and shutting, and the noise that comes out is a whirring, windy rattle, like dried leaves being shaken by the wind. Noise. No words that I can understand.

I want to go out.

Where is the front door? I have taken a wrong turn. "Oh, Miss," I say to a young woman in a maroon smock and slacks. I disapprove of women in slacks, unless they are doing war work, of course. "Miss, can you direct me to the front entrance?"

She takes my arm. I hate that. I pull my arm away.

"You don't want to go out," she tells me.

"Yes, I do," I say. "I have to meet my husband. We're going out to dinner. It's my birthday."

No, wait; it's—

"It's our *anniversary*. We've been married two years now," I say, triumphantly. "His name is Gus. I haven't seen him since last December. He's in the Navy. But soon the war will be over, and he'll come home for good."

"That's just fine. You go on back, now." She turns me around, gently, and gives me a little push—more of a nudge, really. "Go on. It's almost dinnertime."

I resume my walk.

Oh. There's that woman again. I can see her coming, in the mirror on the wall. Now, what

is her name? Florence, Hazel, Mildred, Doris? She is headed this way. I will have to say something pleasant to her, though I don't like her very much. She looks dreadful—her hair is a mess, and her clothes are always rumpled and don't match.

She has nasty habits, too. You would not believe me if I told you. She sometimes urinates right on the floor. Just squats down and makes a puddle in front of everyone. Shameful. I hope she doesn't do it when Gus is here. I'd hate for him to think that this is the kind of place that allows such goings-on.

"Good evening," I say to whatever-her-name-is, but she ignores me and walks right on past. No manners, just like most of them here.

Now where was I going? Oh. Dinner.

The smell of cooking makes my mouth water. I play a little game with myself, trying to guess what we will have. I hope it is not spaghetti again. We have spaghetti entirely too often for my taste. Not that I'm against Italian food, but the sauce dribbles down my front, no matter how careful I am. There is something wrong with the spoons and forks here. They wobble. I have tried to talk to the authorities, but no one listens.

Here it is: the dining room. It is already filling up with people, even though it isn't five o'clock yet.

What are we having? Chicken? Beef stew? Pork roast? I hope there will be enough for seconds. Sometimes I wake up hungry and want a snack, but there isn't any way to get food at night. They lock the kitchen up tight.

I've tried taking rolls from dinner back to my room, but somebody always steals them.

I like to eat; there's nothing wrong with

that. And Gus likes me a little bit plump. A woman should have some meat on her bones, he says, pinching me on the hip with a leer. This makes me blush and giggle.

“Oh, you,” I say, and pretend to slap his hand away.

Where is Gus, anyway? It occurs to me that he has been gone quite a long time. He said he was going to the hardware store. He wanted to fix the screen door latch.

The weather has turned cold in the last few days. It’s almost time to put up the storm windows, and take down the screens. I’ll remind Gus, when he gets here.

Yes, winter is coming. It’s cold, and I can’t find my pink cardigan, the one Gus gave me for my birthday, with the pink seed pearls in flower patterns on the front. It should be in my top drawer. I can’t imagine where it could have gone.

Maybe I left it on the front porch last night. It got a little chilly, sitting there in the swing with Gus and watching the stars.

Gus is taking me out for dinner tonight. Just the two of us. Ellery is spending the evening at Cub Scouts. We’ll pick him up on the way home. If it isn’t too late, I’ll ask Gus to stop at the A&W stand for ice cream. It’ll be closing soon, right after Labor Day.

I ought to go and get dressed.

What should I wear?

I know I packed my navy gabardine suit and my favorite blouse, the peacock-blue-and-purple print with the floppy bow, and my navy pumps, but last time I looked in my closet they weren’t there.

I bet that nasty woman stole them. Her and her old scuffed slippers and that housedress with the stain on the front and the third button missing. I notice things like that. And she hasn’t had her hair done in God knows how long. It looks like a rat’s nest.

The girl from the beauty parlor did my hair right for once, last week. They come twice a

month. She’s nice but not too bright.

That seems to be the case with a lot of these young people. They can manage a simple task, but don’t ask for anything complicated. They get all flustered and they mutter under their breaths. I like people to speak up.

I taught Ellery to speak up. No mumbling, I said to him. Your father never mumbled.

Oh. Poor Gus. He was never sick a day in his life. Then—

His chair, falling over, *crash*.

I couldn’t lift him.

His eyes begged.

The ambulance came.

I waited for hours—the doctor came out of the operating room and said—

Ellery got here as soon as he could. He’s a good son. He comes to visit me here. I wish he came more often.

He’s in college, studying accounting.

I wish he’d find a nice girl and get married.

Gus and I have been married for, what is it, five years now? We got our house with a VA mortgage, after he came back from the war. Two bedrooms, kitchen, living room, den, and bath, and there’s a patio out back. Gus is going to build an outdoor barbecue out of cinder blocks.

I like to look nice for Gus. A woman shouldn’t let herself go just because she’s found a husband. My mother never did. She always put her hair up in pincurlers after Daddy left for work and combed it out again before he came home, and put on perfume and lipstick.

Well, since Gus isn’t here yet, I’ll go ahead and sit down. It’s almost time for them to bring in the food.

I find my chair and put my napkin on my lap. They always check to see if you have your napkin in your lap, or tucked into your collar if you are a slob like some people here are.

I am not a slob.

I am wearing my pink dress and my pink

sweater with the seed pearl design, the one Gus gave me. I look around at the others. Most of them look like slobs. More than a few are even wearing slacks. You'd think they'd take more care with their appearance.

One of the helpers is putting out baskets of rolls and filling the water glasses. I drink some water and take a roll. The rolls are good here—they are always fresh and warm and yeasty, the way I like them. I spread some butter on mine and take a bite.

The helper is saying something. I stop chewing and look at her.

"You better not eat up all that bread before the rest of your food come," she says.

I do not care for her tone. "I will eat what I like," I say, and reach for another roll.

"You behave yourself, now," she says, and takes the basket away before I can grab it.

I will have to report her to the authorities. I would do so right this very minute, but another helper brings my plate: and oh! it's ham! a lovely broiled ham steak, and mashed sweet potatoes with butter, and string beans, and a juicy pineapple slice on top of the ham, all nicely browned. My mother used to do ham steaks just this same way, with pineapple: so tasty.

There are people filling up the chairs at all the tables now. My friends Celia and Dolores sit down and the first helper brings their plates.

She brings back the bread basket, too, but she puts it between Celia and Dolores. Celia takes a roll and offers the basket to Dolores.

"I would like a roll," I say.

"You have one already," Celia says. She points to my plate. There is a roll, already buttered, sitting right next to the ham slice.

"That isn't my roll. I ate mine already." Or was that yesterday? Are there any more rolls? Where's Fredette?"

"Two," says Dolores, looking in the basket. "Fredette's having dinner in her room. She don't feel so good."

Dolores uses terrible grammar. She never had any advantages, poor thing. She worked in the mill all her life, just like her whole family, so one must make allowances.

"Do you want your pineapple slice?" I ask Celia. She has taken it off her ham and put it to one side.

"I dislike pineapple," Celia says. "You can have it."

I reach over with my fork and take the pineapple slice and look over at Dolores's plate. She snatches up *her* pineapple slice (in her fingers! how disgusting!) and eats it very quickly, with a disagreeable look in my direction.

A helper comes around and collects our plates. Then she comes back with our coffee (it is always decaf here, though I ask over and over again for regular) and a plate with four cookies on it.

"What kind of cookies?" Celia asks, squinting. She's left her glasses in her room again.

"Oatmeal raisin?" Dolores says hopefully.

"Ginger snaps," the woman says.

She leaves, and I take a deep breath. Now it's safe to ask the question I've been wanting to ask.

"Do you have ghosts in your rooms?" I ask Celia and Dolores.

"Certainly," Celia says.

"Do they sit there and make noises at you at night? Rustling noises? Like dry leaves in the wind?"

"Of course," Dolores says. "I don't pay any attention to them, though."

"What do you do?" I ask.

"I just tell them to take a hike," she says.

Celia nods vigorously. "I do the same thing," she says. "I tell them, vamoose! And they do. You have to show them who's boss."

"I'll have to try that," I say.

"Give 'em an inch, they'll take a mile," says Dolores.

"I want a cookie," Celia says.

We each take a cookie. There is one cookie left on the plate. Dolores takes it and breaks it in half and gives half to Celia, giving me a triumphant look.

"What about me?" I ask.

Dolores gets up from her chair, not without a great deal of puffing and blowing. She is very fat. "You don't need any more cookies. What you are is greedy," she says.

Celia nods. "You are a little pig, that's what you are."

"I'm not," I say.

The two of them look at each other. Celia says, "Come on."

"I'm coming," Dolores says.

"Where are you two going?" I ask Celia and Dolores.

"I want to watch television," Celia says. She knows I hate television.

"So do I," says Dolores. "Let's go."

"Well, *I'm* going to go to the library to read the newspaper while I wait for Gus," I say. "Good night."

They don't answer, but drift off together. Their heads are round and white, and they bob a little like balloons on strings.

I drink the watery coffee and stare at the cookie crumbs on the plate. "I am not a greedy pig," I say to the empty chairs.

Everyone else is leaving the dining room too. The sound of scraping chairs and shuffling feet is loud; there is no rug in this room, only green and white linoleum, in squares.

A helper comes over. "It's time to go now," she says, loudly. They all think you're hard of hearing in this place. I'm not. My hearing is excellent and it always has been.

Ellery says he can never sneak into the house late because I always hear him, no matter how quiet he tries to be. He tries to make a joke out of it. But I tell him he has no business staying out so late.

Gus says, "Boys will be boys, Mother."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I say. This makes them both laugh, and I always pretend to be insulted, but I know they are only teasing me.

I pull myself out of my chair, getting a cramp in my right calf. Gus should be here soon. What if he wants to go dancing after dinner, and me with a cramp in my leg! Well, walking will help.

I go out into the hallway and look at the bulletin board.

Tomorrow is a shopping trip. The bus leaves at ten. I will call Gus and ask him if there is anything he'd like me to pick up. I know Ellery needs some new socks.

In the parlor, the television set is on. Three or four people are lined up in front of it in the bluish light. More balloon heads. But these are tied to their chairs, I notice, so they can't float away until the show is over.

I walk on past. I am a little out of breath. I should not have eaten so much spaghetti. Italian food is very filling, and also indigestible.

The library is empty, peaceful. I turn on a reading lamp and put my feet up on a hassock and unfold the newspaper.

I read the comics to Ellery every morning while he has his breakfast. It is our little ritual. "Read me about Terry and the Pirates," he says. "Read me about Steve Canyon! Read Dick Tracy and The Phantom!"

Then, after he's finished eating, I read to myself: Mary Worth and Brenda Starr, Gasoline Alley and Rex Morgan, M.D.

This paper has different comics. No Snuffy Smith and Barney Google, no Nancy, no Li'l Abner and Daisy Mae, no Mark Trail.

What a strange newspaper. There are pictures in color on the front page. The paper rustles as I unfold it and try to make sense of what it says. Yemen, Wuhan, Kabul. Where are these places? I must find a globe, or a map.

Ellery and I put up a map of Asia and the

Pacific up on the dining room wall. We stick colored drawing pins on all the places where Gus might be.

The war will be over any day now. The radio said so.

Chosin, Inchon, Seoul. Heartbreak Ridge; Triangle Hill.

I make an attempt to say the names out loud, but my mouth feels like it is full of feathers. Pfff, pfff, pfff is all that comes out.

The paper drifts to the floor and I sit with my hands folded in my lap, here in this small puddle of light.

I'm very tired, and Gus hasn't come.

I should go to my room, where the ghosts wait with their toothy grins, mouths opening and shutting, opening and shutting.

Will I still see them when I cross over to where they are, on the other side?

Cross over.

I remember that minister my mother liked. What was his name? The Reverend Mr Crawford. When he talked about someone who died, he said they had "ridden on ahead."

The newspaper needs to hire better proofreaders. Just look at the date on this page: June 5, 2020.

Ellery is graduating high school this Saturday, June 9, 1966. I've had it marked on the calendar for months. We will go to Bookbinder's to celebrate. Ellery loves their snapper soup. So does Gus. I prefer clam chowder.

Is it dinnertime yet? I should go and see. But I'm not hungry.

I'd better get to the front door so I can let Gus in . . . he's awfully late tonight.

I am so tired of all this walking. I never will get there. I'm tired, but I don't want to go to my room because the ghosts will be there, waiting.

Perhaps if I just go into some other room to sleep I may outwit them.

Is there a room with an empty bed that

I could creep into and rest for a while?

Everything aches: my legs, my arms, my poor feet. All those years in heels. I love shoes, though.

Gus always teases me about them. "How many pairs of shoes does one small woman need?" he says. "Want me to build an extra room onto the house? Seems like you need more than just a closet for all those shoes," he says.

When your feet hurt, everything hurts. I have to say, these sneakers are not stylish, but they are more comfortable than heels. Only, at night, my feet still hurt.

"You're not young anymore, Mother," Ellery said last time he was here, and I told him how my feet hurt.

What a thing to say. And he should talk. He's sixty-one and bald as an egg.

It occurs to me that Ellery has not been to visit me for some time. He must be very busy with work—and with the boys. He coaches their Little League team and is assistant Scoutmaster too.

I remember when Gus and Ellery made Ellery's car for the Pinewood Derby. Ellery won. His picture was in the paper. Gus was so proud.

Oh, for just one night of restful sleep. How long has it been?

Sleep. I reach out and turn off the reading lamp. The library is dim and restful now. Perhaps I can sleep a bit, here in this comfy chair.

I close my eyes and it's quiet and dark. Oh, I could sleep for years!

Sleep, the darkness whispers. *Sleeeeeeeep*.

The overhead light snaps on, and I blink in the sudden glare.

"Mrs Greenbriar, you must go to bed now," a woman's voice says.

It's that girl in the maroon slacks and smock. She has a nametag on, but I can't read it in this dim light. "It's bedtime," she says.

“Come along, I’ll take you to your room.”

“I don’t want to,” I say.

“What’s that, dear?” and she lifts my feet off the hassock and hauls me upright. “Up we go.”

“I don’t want to,” I say again. “I want to stay here. I’m waiting for my husband.”

“You have to go to sleep,” she says, hustling me down the corridor.

I try to explain to her that I was sleeping, but she doesn’t hear me.

In my room the ghosts are standing along the wall. I have no roommate these days, which is just as well, for there isn’t room for another person. The ghosts take up a lot of space, standing there in a row like passengers waiting for a train.

The maroon girl doesn’t see them. She helps me off with my sweater and dress and slip and underwear; she pulls my nightgown on over my head and yanks it down to my knees. She takes off my sneakers and socks. She puts my slippers on my feet.

She leads me into the bathroom. It’s best just to go along with them; if you try to hang back and do things for yourself they get angry.

She watches from the door with her arms folded in front of her while I pee and wash my hands and face and take out my dentures and put them in the plastic container with my name printed on it in black marker: GREENBRIAR.

Sometimes I look at the letters too long and they lose their shapes. Perhaps I need new glasses.

I look in the mirror and see that woman again, the dough-faced one with the pink scalp showing through her scanty white hair, the one with the raddled cheeks and the warty nose like the nose of the wicked witch in the fairy tales, the one whose eyes stare back at me in terror.

Who is she, and what is she so frightened of?

The girl is still watching me. It’s hard to

get used to being watched, but I pretend I am invisible.

She leads me back into the bedroom. The ghosts watch as she levers me into the bed and covers me with the sheet and blanket and bedspread. “How’s that?” she says.

She doesn’t wait for me to answer. She switches off the overhead light and pulls the door nearly shut—they always leave a gap about a foot wide—and she is gone.

I look down at the two hands on top of the bedspread.

Whose hands are these, all cords and veins, thin bluish spotted skin, swollen knuckles and heavy, ridged nails? I move my arms and the hands rise, then fall again.

I study them for a few minutes while the dark seeps up around the bed and the edges of the room soften. Then I look up, and there they are.

The ghosts.

They see me looking, and they lean forward and begin their harangue.

They do not stop and they do not take turns. I can’t explain how I know they are talking, but they are. The dry leaves rattle. Fssss, fssss, fssss.

The bony faces gleam in the reflected light; the empty eye sockets stare at me. Fleshless jaws clamp and unclamp, opening and shutting, opening and shutting. Sticklike arms and legs show grayish-white through the thin ragged clothing, the scraps and shreds that drift around their forms like mist.

“What do you want from me?” I ask. They never answer.

In the morning when the girl comes to help me get dressed, I will complain about the ghosts and my ruined sleep. “You had a bad dream,” the girl will say. If I go to the office and try to tell the woman there, she will say the same thing. They are all in this together.

“A bad dream, that’s all it was,” they say. Job’s comforters, all of them.

The ghosts came here with me. I know that now.

They have been here all the time. And I will take them with me when I go.

I wish that I could tell them to take a hike, vamoose, the way Celia and Dolores claim they tell their ghosts. But I can't: my ghosts need me. They don't have anyone else but me. They don't have anywhere else but here, where I am.

There is no other where for them to be.

I recognize them now.

Mother, father, husband, son, I say, and there is a flicker in the caverns where their eyes would be.

Though I cannot understand the words they hurl and gnash at me, I know what they have come to give me: *oh*, I say.

Oh. That's what you want. All right. All right.

I lie back on my pillow. Shut my eyes.

And feel myself, at last, drift upward into the voiceless air. □



Breath

Laura Tafe

The American Dream

Devina Gonzalez

What is the American Dream?
And what does it even mean?
Is it for the men they deem worthy to cross the border?
Or the men who carry the weight of their families on their shoulder?
Is it for the man with a loose seam in his hat reaping the soil?
Or the man in the sun's gleam with callused hands harboring remnants of oil.

Is it my Abuelito with leathered cheeks sketched with lines from the sun,
The man who collected coins from cans he corralled after a day's work was done.
Mi Abuelito, sick and tired, should be retired.
Sweetness of a sugar cane on his tongue, while there are growths in his lungs.
Festering from the fumes, that his industrial body has consumed.
Help, he can't breathe, choking on the American dream.

If it's not for the men eager to cross the border,
Or the men who carry the weight of their citizenship on their shoulder,
Maybe the hardworking man whose sweat from the brow is his only tear.
And if not them, am I even near?
If it's neither for the man with the unhinged seam,
What the hell is the American Dream?

Blue

Sierra Green

Blue comes to me in the daylight and pushes me down
She is jealous, she cannot bear the thought of me in the world
Without her, free to do as I please
Blue owns the country, Blue wears the crown.
Blue comes to me in the moonlight and reminds me of all I have lost
She makes me cry, she likes to try and comfort
But her aura steals away from me any emotion that I might want
Asphyxiates instead, a pillow soft and deadly
Sometimes I can evade her toxic love, but if ever you see me frown
You can be sure without a doubt
Blue owns the country, Blue wears the crown.



Artwork Courtesy of Rushay Amarath and Alexandra Flemington, *Protanopia*



Study Break
Devina Gonzalez

At Eighty-Eight

Don Herzberg

Dad is eighty-eight, walks with small steps,
and between the kitchen and the den
often leans against the counter or a chair
or perhaps the memory of stronger legs –
might mutter to no one in particular
that everything is fine. I picture him
on his way to a lighter longer stride,
to a weightless happiness where his wife
of almost sixty years can dismiss him again,
sneer at his yellow socks and matching shirt
but still look at him with a shadow of desire
trapped in her eyes when she sees him
in that plaid sport coat that has him looking
like the most handsome man she's ever seen.

Cancer Feels Far Away

Samantha Crowley

Cancer feels far away
Far away
Until it's too close
And suddenly it is shaved pieces out of your back
And the large scar on your head.
And the doctor is talking about MRIs and DNA.
You know those words. Those abbreviations
You have heard so many times
But suddenly they are just letters in your head
And a roaring in your ears
And you want someone to tell you what to do
To take it away
(whatever that means)
But then the results come back
Benign
Benign
Benign
And you feel silly for even worrying
Was it you, that thought so wrong?
Was it paranoia?
Seeing patients under the knife day in and day out
You can so easily imagine yourself among them
Just another face quickly draped behind a blue screen
And an impassive physician staring at those cells
--that part of you—
Under a microscope without actually seeing you.
Cells are easy.
We've been taught, now, how to categorize them
How to count the figures and read the scans
How to stage.
But all the world's a stage, they say, and when you're atop it
Sometimes you forget your lines
And it's all you can do not to scream.
Improvise, they taught you.
Remember your SPIKES and your sutures.
Remember to get your DOs and don't forget to study.
The next time there is a patient in front of me,
Will I forget the drape?

They taught me well, and I know all the words.
I've memorized my lines. But what will I do the next time I find myself
In the audience,
And it starts all over again?



Artwork Courtesy of Harrison Glicklich, *Mainomenos 2021* (36" x 48" Acrylic and Paper on Canvas)

How is your heart?

Erik Carlson

That is to say, how is your place of rest?
Your instrument of constant arrival
and inevitable departure? When

it grows still and can no longer bear the
silence, call to mind this wondrous mystery:
the world turns in cadence with its sacred

pulse. And with each breath, Weary and Renewed
intermingle, pausing in their dance to
pass along their wisdom before rushing

onward to rejoin the greater song. That
eternal harmony, composed of our
collective hearts, moving as one earth-beat.

Glimmer

Hunter Jackson

Anguish
and despair,
Exasperation
and isolation;

The headlines
Replay,
Just about
Everyday.

Optimism
truly tested,
Majority
feeling bested;

The virus
inundates,
Death toll
frustrates.

However,
last week,
Hope
returned meek.

Smiles via
Vaccines,
National vitriol
Weans.
Progress,

Less apart;
Teeming,
My heart.



The tie that binds

Laura Tafe

Shoulder Ache

Two years ago, you told me you were sick while we were sitting inside an ice cream store in Boston. It was January, and I looked at the dirty-brown city snow covering the sidewalks as I tried not to cry. The lights felt suffocating, the table sticky, and the Ariane Grande song on the speakers too loud. I sipped on my lukewarm tea as you explained your dismal odds of survival. You got up after you told me the news like you had announced you were moving rather than dying. I wanted to grab that crusty snow and throw it at every car that drove by. How dare these people act like nothing had changed? You came into the doctor's office with a nagging shoulder ache. How had it turned into a stage IV advanced carcinoma?

There is something bizarre about being a medical student while someone you love is undergoing intensive treatments for an incurable cancer. In class, we are often presented with cases. We are introduced to a patient through their name, age, and sex. Sometimes the author will throw in a fun fact about their family, job, or hobbies. Afterwards comes a constellation of symptoms:

-Mr. Smith, 47 year-old teacher, presents with a 4 month history of right neck swelling that has not improved with antibiotic treatment.

-Mrs. Johnson, 72 year-old female, who loves to spend time with her grandkids, complains of night sweats, increasing abdominal pain, and fatigue.

We are shown their abnormal lab values and inauspicious scans. We learn about their treatment options and that sometimes, the patients do get better.

One day, somebody will write a case that sounds like yours. AJ, 24 year-old male, who loves playing tennis presents with a shoulder ache. A sleep-deprived medical student will take a sip of coffee before pondering whether you have the malignancy they learned about in a recent lecture. They will take a look at your scans. The images will show the metastases that cover your insides but they won't look anything like the person I have known my whole life.

I think about you, all alone as the MRI machine whirrs. Then, I think about the jokes you make when the whole family is playing cards. Jokes that make us laugh so hard that we forget the rules of the game we're playing. I think about all the things the case won't say:

-AJ, 24 year-old male who can eat obscene amounts of sushi and then ask for more.

-AJ, 24 year-old male who loves asking about the soup of the day.

-AJ, 24 year-old male whose ideal afternoon consists of visiting the American Tort Law Museum.

-AJ, 24 year-old male who knows all the words to the Madagascar 2 soundtrack.

-AJ, 24 year-old male who is the center of the room even when he's sitting on the sidelines.

When we were little, we would play Mario Kart for hours. Rainbow Road or Moo Moo Meadows? Motorcycle for flexibility or kart for stability? Now, the questions have changed. PD-1 or CTLA-4 inhibitor? Is your liver healthy enough to withstand another round of chemo? Did you get any sleep or does your back hurt too much? How many times did you throw up today? Are you well enough to go for a stroll? When will this end?

LIFELINES

Will this end?

Two weeks ago, I came to visit you before you began yet another round of treatment. The mud caked our shoes as we walked through the woods. You put on a brave face and I tried my best to reciprocate. You pummeled me with questions about school, my friends, my crush. I answered like we had all the time in the world. 15 minutes after leaving your house, I opened my car door, screamed, then drove back to school to study for an immunology exam.

It has been two years since you told me the news. Often, I find it in myself to be reasonable, approach the matter calmly, and trust the rigorous science that has kept you alive so far. Sometimes, I am confronted with the possibility of a world without you. On those days, I want to burn down the Connecticut River, knock down the White Mountains, and then scream again. It started as a shoulder ache!

It was supposed to be just a shoulder ache!

□

garden

Kathryn Moritz

In the mammography room, the chill
reminds me of the cold walks back
from the barn, everything tight

under a dark winter sky. Stars
as severe as the calcifications
on the scan. How beautiful, these

constellations that swirl atop tissue.
When the tech wilts the machine down
onto my breast, milk beads at the nipple,
drips onto the floor, forms a small white pool.

Weeks later I watch the garden of my body
shrivel back vines and vineyards, creeping
into the stale silence of a coming quiet.

I started pruning with a pixie cut,
my lopsided bangs, the curls that refused
my desires, lay on the floor, limp and leftover.

After chemo starts, I shave the luscious curls
of my mons pubis, the porcine pricks of my
underarms, the wildflower landscape of my legs.

Tell me, body, what spring smells like.
What summer offers. What autumn trims away.
I will listen to my breasts and when they are gone,

I will listen to the snow tap against the window,
and it will tell me its brief story of falling and I will
remember that in the beginning, as it will be
in the end, there was a tree. There was fruit.

Finish Line (Survival Odds)

Kate Meyer-Currey

no I don't have time for you today cancer thanks
but no thanks I have thought about you enough
over the last few months to last me a whole lifetime
whatever tumour stats are pumped into the prognosis
predictor algorithms I know arbitrage is risky at my
age and the sum of my days will metastasise into death's
fixed odds anyway but the sudden fact of your existence
raised them in your favour let's face it midlife is a numbers
game a law of diminishing returns an unfair exchange
where you're the banker so I can't afford to leave it to
chance that I'll get lucky now it's an ante post in-play
race against time I'm not sure whether to go with the
tipsters' favourite accumulation hare because my money's
on the underdog tortoise hobbled by the asian handicap
of dwindling days while your spread's already laid on the
hare so you hit a double dutch payoff each time one of my
cells divides each way you're covered as the closing line
looms looking like the outright winner while I'm the long
shot maiden unless my last ditch martingale punt makes
me a better all out selection I'm going all in all weather in
play or not no also ran for me quids in even if I'm disqualified
for hormone therapy doping that still feels like gold to me
not a miss pink ribbon congeniality medal for good sport
survivors I'm favourite for nailed on the nose dead heat
this filly's still got form

The Corner of Hannah and Adams

Erik Carlson

Two blocks away,
I make my new home.

The textbook, “How to Become a Doctor Parts 1 - 4,”
is placed on an oaken desk, crisp and clean, no dogeared pages.

I step into my short coat, stethoscope dangling around my neck,
and delight in the invitation of medicine.

Between studies, I re-learn this place.
Memory’s tendrils tighten around my ankles, holding me here.

Bone deep, they force me to remember.
A bungalow abuts a three-flat; the red soil, pungent and familiar.

Out, damn’d spot, I plead,
but the asphalt remains, indifferent to the years.

And each morning, as I wipe sleep from bleary eyes,
I pass that street corner, two blocks away.

Fallen leaves fade, nourishing nascent seeds.
I hold life in its dawning and accompany it in its twilight.

Wizened grime now varnishes the white coat.
Coffee-stains baptize the instruction manual.

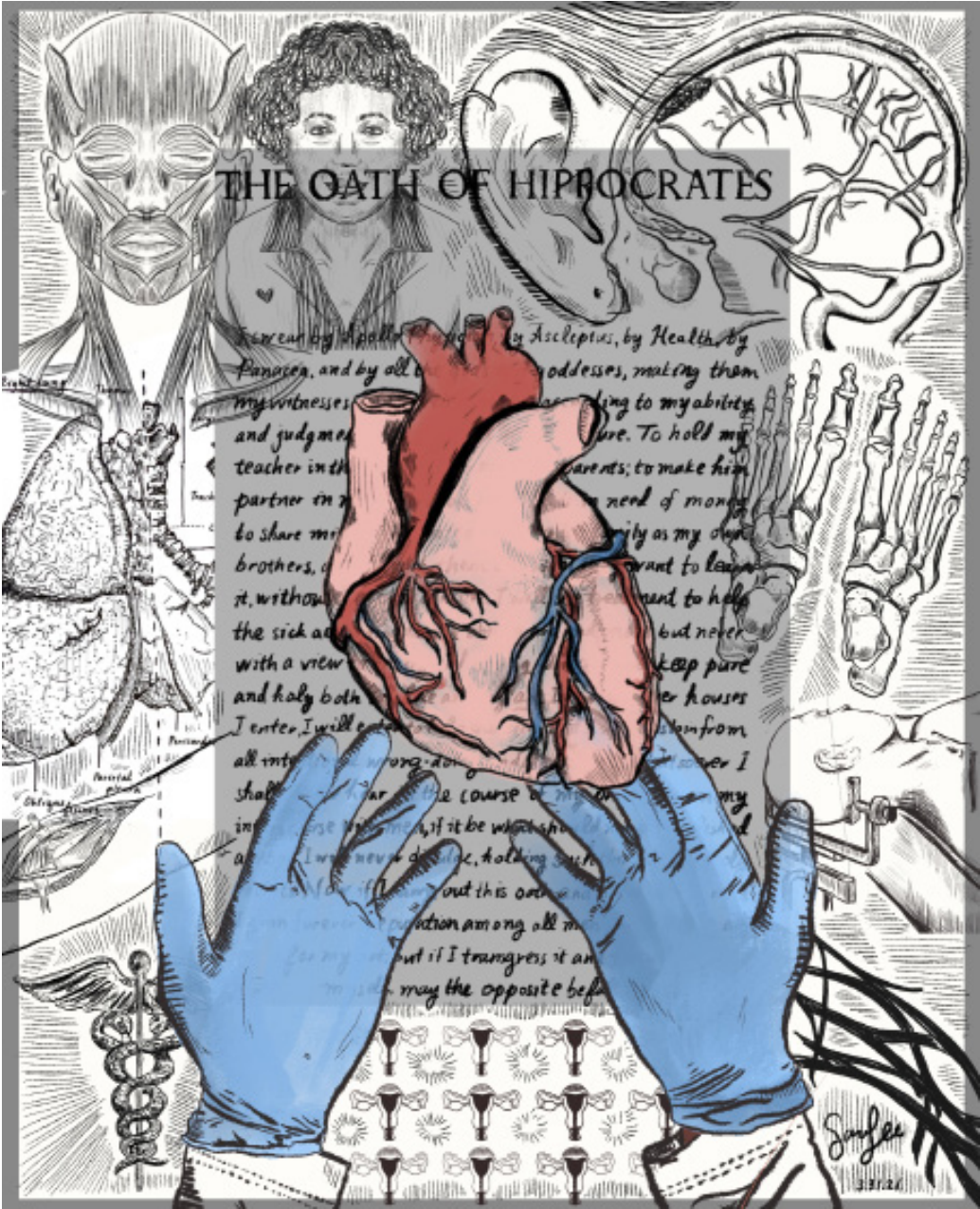
And soon, a place I left, never to return,
becomes a place I grow and learn to heal.

Yet, no matter how many years I train,
I can never return him to his husband’s arms.

Even my most diligent preparation,
will never stop the stranger’s bullet

that forever fractured my family
and shattered my heart

on that same dusty street corner,
two blocks away.



The Practice of My Art

Yeonsoo Sara Lee

The Gift

Stewart Massad

I was the night intern, on call when she came in with fever after chemotherapy. Her nurse called me for admitting orders. I went to see them, down the dim corridor between the workroom and the room at the end of the hall that looked out over the darkness of the park, speckled with streetlight beyond the blinds. I saw as soon as I came into her room that she was dying but not ill. I reviewed her cancer treatment history and I went down the list of intern questions for the chart.

“Allergies?” I asked.

“None.”

We went through a modest review of systems, a medical history, her surgical history. She confirmed the cancer history in the admission note from two weeks before: increasingly radical failed operations, first-line chemotherapy, second, third, names of drugs, sites of recurrence, dates. I examined her, finding only cachexia, a cardiac flow murmur, and a tumor-ridden liver that pushed her belly out like a pregnancy.

“Do you have a living will?”

She looked at the wall. The painted white plaster revealed nothing. She looked back at me. “No.”

I should never judge; I always do, though sometimes I hide it. I didn’t then. In her chart her occupational history listed her as a former intensive care nurse, someone who had seen the detritus of futile resuscitations beyond count: the scattered papers, torn wrappers, soiled bedding, blood, and the corpse in the center, violated, smashed, dead in spite of all. She had a lethal cancer. Her gaze told me she knew and was unconcerned.

“Have you considered one?”

“Yes. But my husband isn’t ready.”

“But you?”

She shrugged, looked off at the light rimming

the bathroom door. “He isn’t ready.” She looked back at me. “He’s stood by me for forty-three years. He’s been good to me. It’s my gift to him.”

We got the lines rigged to the port in her chest, ran in the fluids and the antibiotics and the growth factors and the antiemetics. I went on to someone else I couldn’t help.

I wondered what would prompt a gift like that: living through the sham of treatment for the cancer she knew would kill her, waking up from surgery with her belly torn up and sutured closed, enduring the chemotherapy which was easy enough with premedication but not the nausea that followed nor the fatigue that left her bedbound for days nor the confusion nor the trips to the hospital when she was too spent to get up but did, and then having to face the self-satisfied intern who thought her a fool for doing all that when she might be home with a hospice nurse and he might be sleeping. It showed a special courage: not the courage of the cancer support group that applauds survivors for sustaining hope against impossible odds, but the courage to continue knowing that the odds are impossible and the struggle is futile and the pain is meaningless except as an offering to a man who had no comprehension of how deep a sacrifice she’d pledged to make.

Compounding that, he did not come to sit with her. He did not watch the little television on the articulating arm off her headboard, as other husbands did. He did not visit to chat, or to hold her hand, or to read to her, or to show her pictures of their terrier. He did not come in to plead with her to get up and walk, to eat, search the web with him for postings of experimental trials or testimonials from patients treated with Mexican immunotherapy or Bulgarian detoxification regimens or prayer. He did not marshal

the children; they had none. He stayed at home and came in only when her marrow had recovered and she'd been given another round of chemotherapy and she had the strength to walk to the wheelchair and roll away. That was during the day, and I did not see him.

* * *

She came back several times before she died, always at night, each time thinner, paler, more bruised by falls needles and a lack of platelets. Each time I asked her.

“Do you have a living will?”

“No,” she said, every time.

After, I went out and wrote the orders that diverted the course of her dying, that nudged the trajectory of her decline into a curve less steep. It was only a question, a standard that every second year medical student knows to ask. But the repetition was my penalty to her for persisting in treatment when hospice care at home would have been easier for us both.

I would go by her room after being called to place a nasogastric tube, or to assess a hypoxic lung cancer patient, or declare a death. I'd stand in the doorway and make sure she was breathing, under the light the nurses left on to quiet her confusion when she woke thinking she might be home, or healthy. I wondered what sin she was expiating, dying in the hospital. Something dreadful, I was sure, some soul-wrenching infidelity, not just a physical cheat but abandonment that had gone wrong and he had forgiven. It had to be something that deep to merit such a gift.

I never asked her. It was not my place even to wonder. Whatever it had been, I hated him for having endured it.

* * *

She died in the end, of course. I was away, spending a week's vacation on a medical mission to Honduras with an ICU nurse I'd met on a prior rotation. We spent our days trying to cure diseases of poverty with antibiotics and antihypertensives and hypoglycemics. We spent our last night in a concrete cell in a hotel in Tegulcigalpa, trying to stay awake for the dawn

flight home, trying to fight off the overwhelming sense of mortality we both felt by drinking aged rum and fucking till we were both too exhausted to sense anything at all.

When I got back, I did not think to ask what had happened to the dying woman: we were interns, and deaths happened around us all the time. We did not ask after them. But then one morning I stopped in the ICU to see my friend. I always looked into the cubicle doors as I passed, trying to assess whether the inhabitants might survive, how long they might last. She was in one room by the nursing station. She was yellow and dead still, her hair spread out on her pillow, her hands on the sheet, only the whites of her eyes showing, her chest rising and falling with the pulse of the ventilator. I went over to the nurses station. My friend was there.

“Hey,” I said.

She looked up and smiled at me. “Hey, yourself.”

“What's up with 23?”

Her smile went askew, her eyes rolled. “Cancer everywhere. Found pulseless. Coded. Brought down here. Husband wants everything done but wouldn't come in to see what everything is. The bastard. The unit attending made him.”

I went back to the room. He was in a recliner behind the partially pulled curtain, his hands in his lap, staring at her. He was nondescript, a man used to being taken care of, now on his own. He was balding, with an ineffectual comb-over. He wasn't obese, but pudgy, the build of an athlete who couldn't outrun age. His shirt was rumpled from sleeping in the chair. His shoes were sensible, scuffed. Nothing to inspire heroism.

When I came back the next day, the bed was empty, the sheets made up nicely with crisp hospital corners, the pillow centered, the mattress leveled, the monitor dark. The husband was gone. My friend was off. We were meeting after my signout. □

Excited

Vincent Casaregola

“This can work,” I say, “I can, I mean *we* can make this . . .”

But she just shakes her head slightly, and sighs, you know that kind of sigh that just means we’re going nowhere.

And I know that it’s because I get excited and can’t stop talking, often about the same thing, over and over again and again, like a song put on endless repeat and repeat.

And so I just keep at it, but still, I know that I can get better at listening and having conversations that are normal, well almost, and so I say

“I can make this work . . .”

But by then her mouth is a straight line, neutral and unfeeling, like the anti-happy face with the straight-line mouth, and her eyes darken and ‘fade to black’ as I call it, like the end of a noir film, and so out of the blue, I say

“I wished you liked noir films the way I do and then we could watch together, you know, ‘cause I know so much about the old black-and-whites . . .”

But then I know that’s the wrong thing to say, and she seems to retreat away from me, and that’s when I see that bit of leaf on her sweater, on her shoulder, and I try to not to look, but I can’t help it, you know, it shouldn’t be there, out of place and all, so finally I reach over and sweep it off with the back of my hand.

And she gives me that look and starts to move, and she rises from her chair and turns, walking straight for the café door, so I’m surprised, and I’m always surprised at how she moves so gracefully, as if she could never make a false step, then I want to follow, and getting up, and all too loud in this public place,

I say

“*we* can make this work . . .”

But I forgot about the napkin tucked in my shirt, and the coffee mug sitting on the table left on the napkin’s edge, and so when I get up too quickly, the mug doesn’t just fall but does, like, a triple somersault, sending spirals of coffee into the air, on the café windows and floor, and even all over my clothes, the cardigan’s old, but the shirt’s the new one, so I’m so shocked I trip and hit the table with my knee, and it goes over with the bang and crunch of wood on wood and shattered glass and plates on wood, and all the wood was what I liked about this place.

But now the waitress comes and glares that special glare they save behind their eyes for the world’s worst customers, like me, I guess, and then the manager is there telling her to go,

and he’s a nice Indian man, or maybe Pakistani, or maybe both, if you can be both, but now he’s got the straight-lipped non-smile, and I’m saying

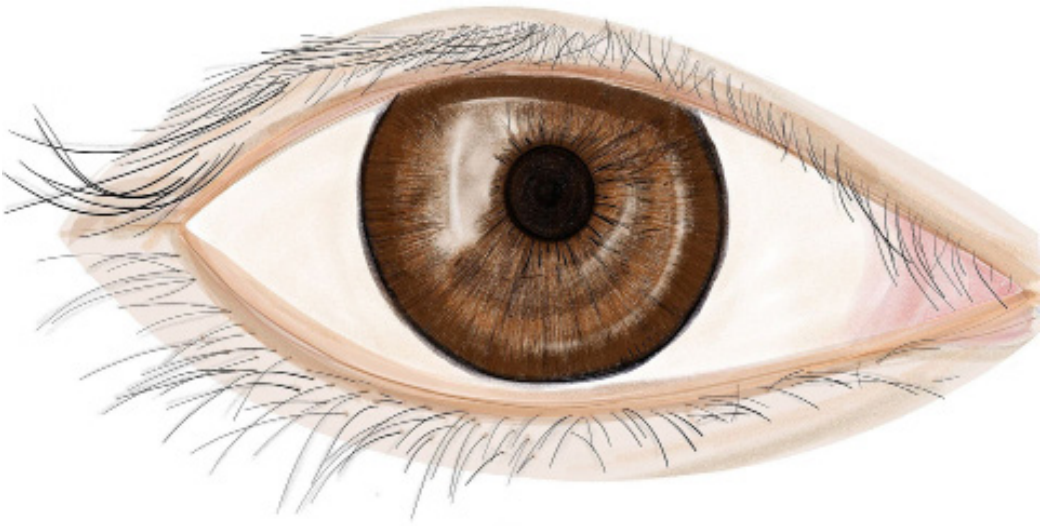
“I’m so sorry—I’ll clean it up, I’ll pay for . . .”

But he’s calling me “*sir*” and asking me to leave, and I just stare, not knowing what to say for a minute, but then I say

“Yes, yes, of course, I’ll leave, that’s the best, but I’ll be coming back to pay and make it right . . .”

But he’s just shaking his head, and I start to leave, but then I add

“it’s just ‘cause I get excited. . .” □



Pinpoint Pupil

Krista Schemitsch

SIGECAPS

Caroline Greer

Ticking time stood frozen
like razor icicles on the church's eaves,
snow that bent the ancient trees.
We stood as shadows in that blank white space,
stone monuments with somber face.
All sound absorbed by mist and freshly fallen frost,
left us alone to contend with crushing thoughts
of the woman whom we lost.

And so, we suffered the most relentless hour.
Tears that fell and quickly froze
became glittering gems in still repose
on the freshly uncovered soil below.

Voices waft through biting breeze,
"There was nothing you could do."
But yet, how could I miss the clues?
In retrospect, they feel as clear
as the cracks in clouds now cobalt blue
with threads of sunlight leaking through.
I've been taught the steps to diagnose,
yet blind to signs in ones held close.

Now flash-bulb branded in my mind
is an acronym in glaring font.
At brunch, once supple cheeks were gaunt,
and then messages were left on read.
Tsunami of ruminations on what was left unsaid,
"Am I a hypocrite, oh Hippocratic oath?
How do I expect to care for others
when I couldn't save surrogate mother?"

Pugnacious thoughts came like the tide,
waxing, waning in rhythmic time.
But on this winter day, violent then sublime,
lucidity did flood my mind.

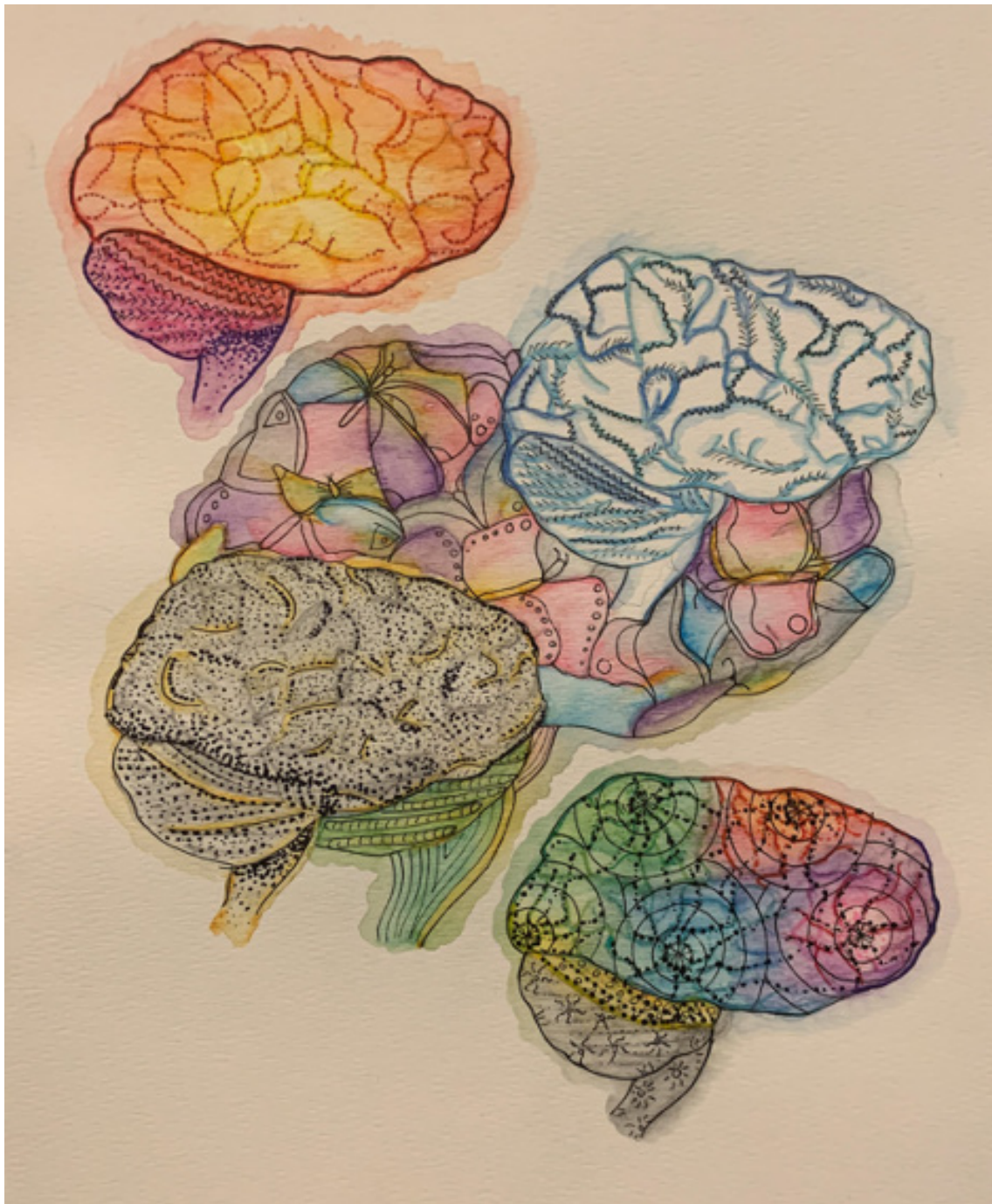
Deceitful blame will try to haunt you,

(cont.)

LIFELINES

cloud your memories, paralyze your passion,
drain blood from your face, left ashen.
Every misfortune comes with burdensome cost,
yet there's a hidden strength to gain from loss.
Like the years of damage from the storm
and the miracle that you were born.
Anguish juxtaposing splendor.

If life were painless, would it be worth living?
Perhaps I should be as forgiving
on myself as I am on others.
Reminded it's a privilege not to be numb, but still, to feel,
and in medicine, as in life,
sometimes the hurt begets the heal.



◀ Grief: What I See and How She Feels

Natalie Ivey

This poem, organized by Kubler's stages of grief, describes the signs of grief we see as healthcare providers contrasted to what those who are grieving feel. What is displayed as a sign of grief is depicted in the first stanza of each section. The second stanza brings to life what the observed person feels from the symptoms of grief. The section concludes with a third stanza depicting the transition to grief's next stage. The signs we see that those who are grieving feel - denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance - are abstractly represented as processes in the brain in the multimedia artwork. Denial is depicted as blue "shock" waves outlining an empty brain which is contrasted to the boiling anger originating from the center of the fiery brain. Bargaining is positioned at the bottom as "wheels turning," representing the sufferer thinking of questions and ideas. Gray, fuzzy static fills the brain of depression - in sharp contrast to the other colorful emotions. Acceptance, a conglomerate brain filled with the combination of colors from the other stages of grief, is depicted as a metamorphosis with caterpillars housed in the cerebellum transforming into butterflies in the cortex.

Denial

I see the shock vibrate as it moves over her face;
She did not know he only had days.
Eyebrows framing empty eyes and a slender pursing of the lips.
And now her fingernails dig into her soft hips.

The doctor must see the shock on my face,
But I only feel this must be a pure mistake.
What is it like to feel completely numb?
This cannot happen to me; I am unfairly stunned.

Denial is the friend of the unlucky idealist.
Subtle in what you see,
But painful as the recipient.
It only shows itself in mild ways,
Until it transforms into anger as emotions decay.

Anger

I see the froth at the corner of her lips,
And her face transforms to the color of sunburnt skin.
The fingers unlatch from the ripped flesh on her hips,

(cont.)

And I watch her breathe at twenty-four breaths per minute.

The people around me must see the anger I feel,
But this raging storm clouds my vision of them.
How I could strangle this fate that kills.
My anger is something I even strongly condemn.

As we sit and watch adrenaline surge,
Anger boils in her soul, ready to be purged.
We sit and wonder if we can take away what she feels,
As she wonders if she can cunningly strike a deal.

Bargaining

Tears form rivers in her eyes and waterfalls on her cheeks.
Her brows are now furrowed, framing the sad eyes of grief.
I see her mouth open and hear audible sobs,
As she holds her deceased loved one close in her arms.

The doctor grasps my shoulder in a tender embrace,
As I know she sees the feelings of torment engulfing this horrid state.
I ask God if I may I trade my life for the sake of his,
Or if I could save him from this dark abyss.

A bargain may seem irrational to the observer,
But it is the last sliver of hope before the grief grows older.
We only see the tears of unanswered wishes
Before the sorrow turns into mental submission.

Depression

It has been a few months since I have seen her now sallow, gaunt face.
Her bones protrude from the weight that she has lost on her frame.
She walks at a slow pace and speaks in monotone mumbles.
There are bags under her eyes; her mind is jumbled.

I see a face I recognize, and I give all my might.
But I cannot concentrate on anything else in sight.
I thought I felt numb when I was in denial,
But now my brain buzzes with incoherent static – this is my hardest trial.
I feel an emptiness that describes the color gray.
Does my feigned smile shroud my dismay?

A deep depression is the unending stage of grief.
The presence of the lost haunting the happy spirit of relief.
When the timing is perfected and a warm light begins to bloom,

(cont.)

That is when acceptance grows to overtake every corner of gloom.

Acceptance

It has been a few months since I saw the sallow, gaunt face.
I almost do not recognize the glow - a smile that radiates.
It is hard to see acceptance from the objective outside.
It looks different depending on the person in which it abides.
It is an airiness originating from the absence of a monstrous weight.
I was happy to see that she had come into a fresh, joyous state.

I see her now and remember her hand on my shoulder.
My grief has matured into an acceptance from a wave that was much colder.
I feel grounded, humbled, and paradoxically blessed
That I have been able to hold onto my memories and still feel at rest.

Acceptance is unexpected from a seemingly impossible process.
It protects the person from which it was fostered.
An observer can see grief eat someone away,
Only to reveal a beautiful metamorphosis at play.
And for the person that feels each stage of affliction,
A memory is cherished and grief is transformed into a positive benediction.



The last salvation

SaQuan Ellison



Final Departure

SaQuan Ellison

Lone Star Medicine

Melissa Huddleston

Rolling hills under the shadow of towering
Clouds that stretch and hover across
Roads that separate you from your
Doctor

The drives are pleasant but long
Hours pass before you can get
Help my mother needs a
Doctor

The decline was astonishingly
Rapid notification still too
Slow for us to reach our
Doctor

He practices what's called family
Medicine that impacts the whole
Community who depend on one
Doctor

The need for patient advocacy is
Constant changing of leadership
Titles that fall on the shoulders of this
Doctor

How many patients can you see in one
Day by day the overlooked struggles
Continue to wear down the community's
Doctor

He works mostly alone but needs a
Team is more of a dream than
Reality for an isolated rural
Doctor

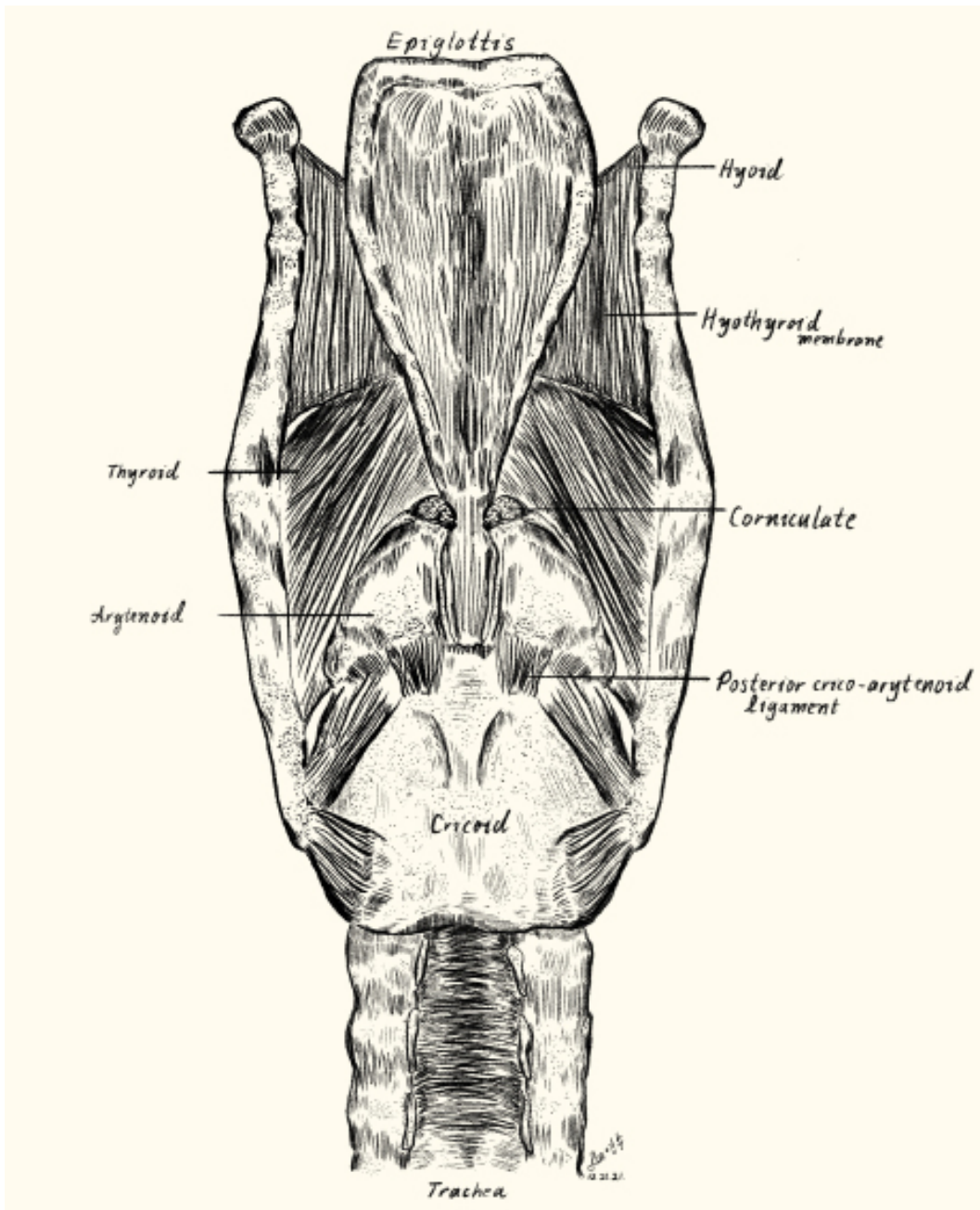
Epistle

Matthew Freeman

So, it turns out that
the people who I thought were tormenting me
might not have been thinking of me at all.
You see, evidently there's double talk on purpose
and there's double talk on accident.

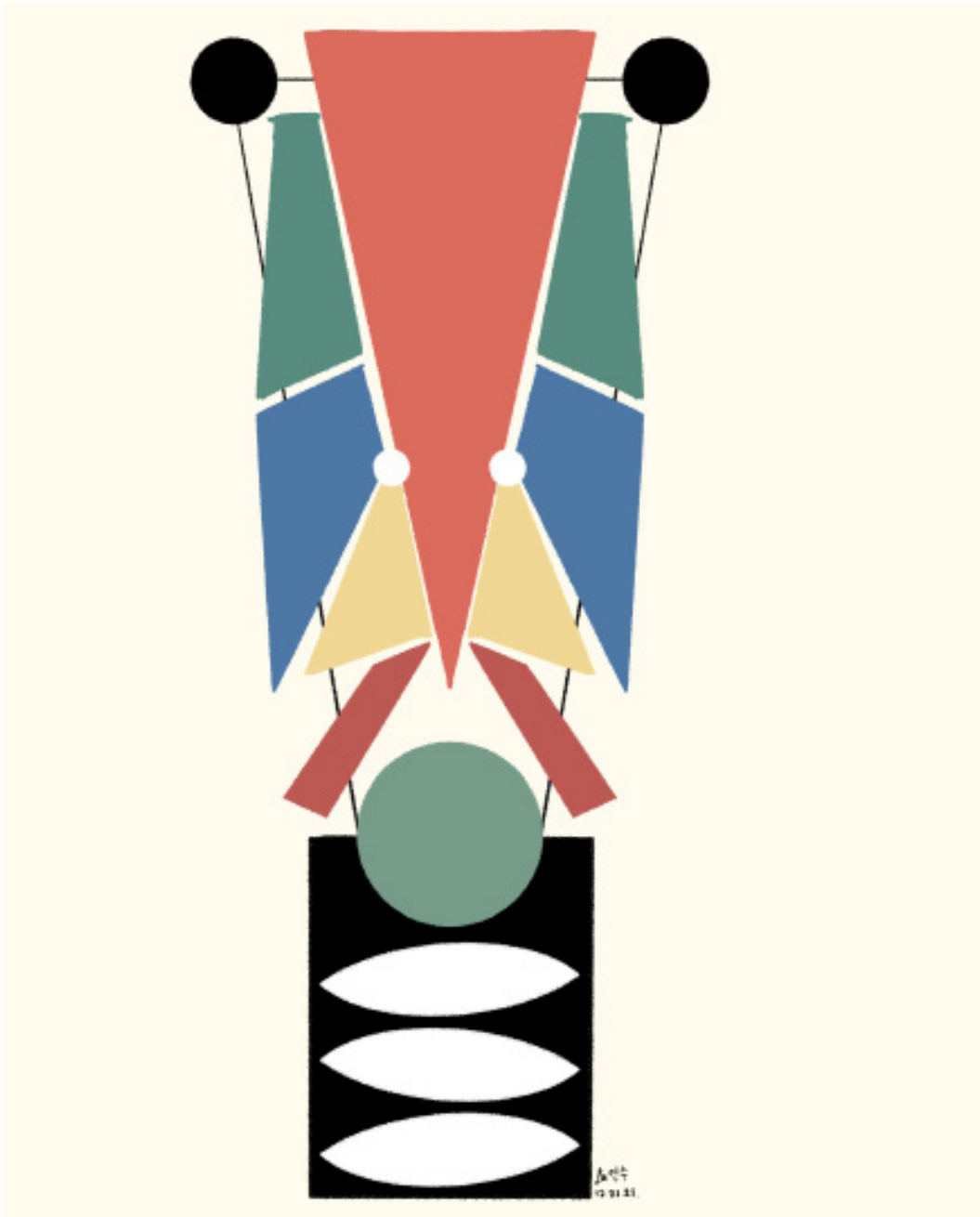
But someone at the pharmacy
did make some demonic marks upon my Ativan bottle.
Right when I was thinking I was ready
to go for the rest of my life unscathed.
People are checking me out, there's color in my face,
I'm free to go back to being a beatnik.
Just a little trip to United Provisions to get some diet soda
is a grand and miraculous adventure.
I don't need any of that old saturnine bullshit.

Well, I called my pharmacy, I just had to.
"Why are people making marks upon my Ativan," I asked.
"Oh, that's just to confirm the pills were counted
twice," a benign presence said. "Because they're a controlled
substance." Well, damn! I guess that weight's gone.
But please, please, Ladylove, when you read this
please know that I am radically changing.



I am the larynx

Yeonsoo Sara Lee



I speak for the trees

Yeonsoo Sara Lee

Migraine Attack

Donna Lee

I know it's coming. I know
the hammer and the pick are readying.
Yet nothing I do stops it. No medication. No
meditation. Slowly the pain swells

like a small wave. The world seems slightly
off-kilter. I sense something over the horizon,
rolling in. I hope for just a wave, but I know . . .
I know the devil has his fun, and I'm *next*.

I know I can't avoid my triggers all of the time.
So I see a room of dressed-up people. And
their scents will linger. They will drift up my nose,
bring tiny hammers to chisel the insides

of my turbinates. My head will start to feel heavy;
my stomach, queasy. I'm lucky. I'm not too far
from home. I can get there before the worst
comes, before all the food I ate heaves up.

And all the while the hammers will be pounding
harder and harder. I'll feel hot, cold, chilled, flushed.
Every sound will hit my eardrums and vibrate through
my head. The footsteps of my partner will hurl

into my brain like an elephant's. The pedestal fan
that whirs will begin to rev its engines like a plane
about to take off. Every light will meet my eyes
like a flashlight's. So I'll block off all the windows,

use that rag to cool my head to cover my eyes.
I won't read anything now, won't look
at anything, won't be touched by anyone,
for every sensation will fire pain in my brain.

If not for the medications I trained myself to take
early on, could I endure the vise? Now I struggle
to keep the antiemetic down while I swallow the pain

(cont.)

LIFELINES

pill, though I know that even a slight taste could

bring both meds up. I try to suck on ice chips, can barely hold a sip of ginger ale. I am rocking in pain, moaning as the hammer pounds and the pick sticks. If there is a hell,

I think, *this is it*. How long will it last? Hour after hour. Can't lie down without nausea rising up. Every movement swirls the stomach, like being in a boat in rough water.

I begin to pace, as I know what's coming. I have to hover over the toilet, grab a towel, throw two down to kneel on. I know I'll get it in my hair, though I'll try not to,

because it comes so suddenly I have no time to think of maneuvers. The body propels forward. Everything comes up. For a moment, I feel better, but it won't last.

I grasp the cup of mouthwash to rinse my mouth. I swish. I try to drink a sip of ginger ale. I'll repeat this scenario, retching, till I gag.

authors

Erik Carlson

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Erik Carlson is a fourth-year medical student applying to Internal Medicine. Originally from Asheville, NC, his interests include infectious disease, critical care, and the intersection between climate change and global health equity.

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Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth

Trevor Canty is a first-year medical student. Hailing from Billings, Montana, he loves to run, read, write, and hang out with his Cat, Glasgow.

Vincent Casaregola

St. Louis University

Vincent Casaregola teaches American literature and film, creative writing, and rhetorical studies at Saint Louis University. He has published poetry in a number of journals, including 2River, The Bellevue Literary Review, Blood and Thunder, Dappled Things, The Examined Life, Lifelines, Natural Bridge, Please See Me, WLA, and Work. He has also published creative nonfiction in New Letters and The North American Review. He has recently completed a book-length manuscript of poetry dealing with issues of medicine, illness, and loss (Vital Signs).

Samantha Crowley

Baylor College of Medicine

Samantha Crowley graduated from the University of Virginia with a BA in Neuroscience, and is now a medical student in Houston, Texas. She has never previously been published outside of scientific journals, but enjoys exploring how poetry and prose allow us to interpret and interact with the world around us in a new way. She plans to enter into a pediatrics residency.

SaQuan Ellison

Matthew Freeman

Matthew Freeman is the author of several books of poems; the most recent full-length collection is called *Ideas of Reference at Jesuit Hall* (Coffeetown Press). He holds an MFA from the University of Missouri-St Louis and tends to write about his recovery from schizophrenia.

Devina Gonzalez

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Devina Gonzalez is a first-year medical student.

Sierra Green

Caroline Greer

University of Virginia School of Medicine

Caroline Greer is a rising M4. After growing up in Northern Virginia she made a sojourn west to attend Pomona College, where she graduated in 2018. She plans on applying for psychiatry residency in the upcoming year. She has always used writing and art as a way of processing the highs and lows of life, which she finds especially important for succeeding in medical school as well as in her future career.

Don Herzberg

Melissa Huddleston

Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center Paul L. Foster School of Medicine

Melissa Huddleston is a third-year medical student. She graduated from Baylor University with a Bachelor of Science in informatics and a secondary major in classics, and received her Master of Public Health in community health education from Baylor University in 2018. She enjoys hiking, reading sci-fi novels, volunteering, and playing board games. She would like to pursue a career in family medicine.

Natalie Ivey

University of South Carolina School of Medicine

Natalie Ivey was raised in Anderson, South Carolina and attended Clemson University majoring in Bioengineering. She is a fourth-year medical student pursuing a career in neurosurgery. In her spare time she enjoys running, tennis, piano, artwork, writing, and baking.

Hunter Jackson

Donna Lee

Yeonsoo Sara Lee

Gina Logan

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Washington University in St. Louis

Dr. Stewart Massad is a gynecologic oncologist and educator. Prior publications include a short story collection, *Doctors and Other Casualties*. Other short fiction has been published in *Lifelines*, *Hektorama*, *Thirdspace*, *Plexus*, and *Blood and Thunder*.

Kate Meyer-Currey

Kate Meyer-Currey lives in Devon. A varied career in frontline settings has fuelled her interest in gritty urbanism, contrasted with a rural upbringing, often with a slipstream twist. Since September 2020 she has had over a hundred poems published in print and online journals, both in the UK and internationally. Her chapbooks 'County Lines' (Dancing Girl Press) 'Cuckoo's Nest' (Contraband Books) are due out in early 2022.

Katie Moritz

Dartmouth College Alum

Katie Moritz lives in Vermont's rural Northeast Kingdom, where she works in communications at a not-for-profit critical access hospital. She studied creative writing at Dartmouth College and has published in *Plume*, *Numéro Cinq*, *Plume Anthology #9*, *Leavings Lit Mag*, and other various reviews. Her short story "The Tooth" has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She takes inspiration from André Breton's belief that "beauty will be CONVULSIVE, or it will not be."

Al Salehi

Krista Schemitsch

Dartmouth College Class of 2024

Laura Tafe

Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center

Dr. Laura Tafe is a physician and collage artist who works as an anatomic and molecular pathologist in New Hampshire. Collage has been the focus of her creative work for the past year and a half. "I love cutting things up into their basic elements and then reassembling to tell a new story. It always amazes me what emerges." She enjoys sharing her artwork, especially with those in healthcare, and hopes it inspires others to prioritize the things outside of medicine that are important to them, brings joy, and honors themselves as a whole person.

Acknowledgements

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LIFELINES

is a literary and art journal featuring works of creativity and nonfiction from students, healthcare professionals, current and former patients, and authors and artists. A student-run publication at Dartmouth, the journal is open to all.

The mission of Lifelines is reflected in its name: to be a thread winding amongst all those who have been touched by the medical experience, and to weave a literary tapestry offering the much-needed creative outlet for doctors, medical professionals, and patients alike.

