the human condition
—— an exploration of art & literature

Volume XVII | 2022
UCSD School of Medicine
DEAR READERS,

The path to becoming a physician is constantly evolving, but in many ways it remains long and winding, and not without hardship. In this literary magazine’s 17-year lifespan, the well-worn steps of 8-hours-a-day lecture have been replaced by the meandering trail of small group learning; river crossings that once consisted of slippery switchbacks of third year or the unique challenges of summiting the mountains many have since begun to clear. And yet despite—or perhaps because of—this constant state of change, the views remain spectacular.

In this aptly-named “exploration of art & literature,” each submission documents the journey itself, describing the suffering of illness. Others explore the journey itself, describing the trials and tribulations that inspired you or the humanity that...
“...cancer...”
Akilesh Yeluru, MS2

...cancer... I knew it. My face burned bright, and an empty pit formed in my stomach — a dark abyss almost as bleak as my now hazy future. ...cancer... How could I have not seen it coming? The signs were all there. Oh, what to do now. What will my family think? How will they feel? Oh, how terrible, this harbinger of death with one fell swoop of his scythe has brought me my sentence and dispatched me into the world...with...with...

What did he say again? ...cancer... No, there was more. Still clutching the note he wrote me, I pull over and read my sentence.

My diagnosis.
There is work to be done.
I will be back.
He'll see.
I will not go down that easily.
This is not a sentence.
It is a fight, and oh, we shall fight.

There is a place beyond the teardrops, Where acceptance and peace are found. A little nook carved out as shelter, To save myself from being drowned.

A space hidden behind the waterfall, Where my past’s pain and guilt fade, Leaving sounds of our endless laughter, Echoing behind the water’s cascade.

It’s in this place I hope to be, Filled with hope, forgiveness and cheer, Where hell comes to a standstill, And heaven lingers near.

This place exists only in my head, A desperate plea for my mind to rest, In reality, I must keep on living, And just hope all turns out for the best.

beyond the teardrops
Ishan Saha, MS1

STAGE 4B HEPATOCELLULAR CARCINOMA | Julia Yuan, MS3

REDFLAG SYMPTOMS | Julia Yuan, MS3
IDDM

Jessica Kang, MS1

be-beep, be-beep, be-beep.

My heels hit the hardwood floor so fast my head spins. Blindingly, I feel around the top of my dresser for my glasses—clink, clang clink! “Oops.” I slip to my knees and squint in the darkness, looking for the telltale hint of silver.

be-beep, be-beep—

Glasses-less, I pull myself to my feet. Muscle memory closes my bedroom door behind me with just the right amount of tension so the hinges don’t creeck. I cross the drafty hallway and creep into my parents’ room, tiptoeing expertly on my pajama pants so as to muffle my steps.

The beeping is louder now. I turn off the monitor.

“Appa.” I gently shake his thick arm, slung comfortably over the blanket. “Your sugar is low again.”

“OH.” He takes it, doesn’t even look at it. He tiredly rubs his face. “I’m sorry. Go back to sleep.”

“I wasn’t sleeping,” I lie. I tug the blanket over his bare arm. “Want me to get you something to eat?”

He turns back onto his side. The sensor sits on my dad’s shoulder, a thick, gray disc, pronged with one giant needle. I stared at it. “I have to stick this in you?” I asked, horrified at the medievality of it all.

“H ow else do you expect it to check my sugar?”

“Appa, that needle is huge.”

“You’re being silly,” he said sternly (this is his favorite reproach for whenever I start to worry too much). “Do you know how many needles I’ve stuck in me over my life? This is much better. I can keep it on for two whole weeks.”

My dad turned out to be right. The old glucose monitor was akin to a vicious mosquito: several times a day my dad would have to prick his fingertip and allow the test strip’s proboscis to slurp at his bright red blood, only for it to tell him that today was another injection after injection after every meal—rather than a twenty-something year old well on her way to medical school.

I unboxed the kit. Along with the continuous glucose monitor came a thick, gray disc, pronged with one giant needle. I stared at it. “I have to stick this in you?” I asked, horrified at the medievality of it all.

“Can you even handle the over thirty million Americans who share this diagnosis—I urge my classmates to please be gentle. Please remember that no disease is deserved: not addiction, not HIV/AIDS, not alcoholic cirrhosis, not lung cancer…and not diabetes. No disease is a moral failing. And every patient—no matter how they ended up before us, no matter what road led them to where they are today—deserves our grace: I ask you to extend it.

And if it helps, you can remember my Appa.

There’s just one thing I didn’t get from my dad—one terrifying, chronic, complicated thing that could have changed the course of my entire life. I sometimes wonder about the twists of genetics that saved me from a lifetime of needles, stringent dieting, and expensive medications…a lifetime of people telling me to work harder at avoiding the foods everyone else gets to enjoy or do better at managing something they’ve never had to manage.

Because, despite the scientific advancements being made in the treatment of this disease, it is one that is still uniquely stigmatized, cruelly judged, and vastly underestimated. So, when we learn about it in the spring, or when we are launched into the world to treat the over thirty million Americans who share this diagnosis—I urge my classmates to please be gentle. Please remember that no disease is deserved: not addiction, not HIV/AIDS, not alcoholic cirrhosis, not lung cancer…and not diabetes. No disease is a moral failing. And every patient—no matter how they ended up before us, no matter what road led them to where they are today—deserves our grace: I ask you to extend it.

And if it helps, you can remember my Appa.
He’s not an alcoholic—she pleaded, tears streaming, blinded by a mother’s love. His eyes, yellow. His face, unconcerned.

It’s been a hard year, hasn’t it? You have to cope somehow but the body carries it all. Months of desperation and heartache sublimated into scarring and failure.

He didn’t complain, even when he was gasping for air, and whisked off to the ICU. They call them Liver Bombs. How cold and unforgiving.

The odds were against him but sometimes all you have is hope. DNAR absent from his vocabulary, he fought, and we fought, and he fell.

Those yellow eyes follow me in my dreams. His family, heavy on my heart.

How do we do this, day after day? The memories sting, but we must remember. Even in heartache, it’s a privilege, sitting with suffering. Sometimes, we can stop it. Sometimes, we just hold space.

It’s heavy work, but we must not harden. May we always remember to see things through their eyes.

To the little bird who keeps me up at night, Why do you chirp ‘til I see the light? Why is it that as I shut my ears tighter, Your dreadful chirps only gets brighter? Why do your chirps bounce ‘round in my head, Long after your last note’s been sung? How long will you make me lay in my bed, Until this battle is won? To the little bird who keeps me up at night, don’t you see preparing is a fruitless fight? Can’t you feel your concerns and anxiety, Well up and cry inside of me? Why do your chirps ring down the streets, Without your calls returned? Don’t you see now lying in these sheets, That those bridges are gone and burned? But oh, little bird that sings to me, Please do not stop your song. For if you do decide to flee, I fear I’ve been alone all along.

They told me to write my story, And yet if I told it, it would bore me Because the tale they want to hear is a lie That depicts nothing of my cries, Instead it paints a pretty picture, Of the life I should have lived If I was never in fact injured, Of a person who only gives.

Why is it that when I’m not a block, You think I’m completely bizarre? Why do you chain me in your locks, When I go outside your radar? Why do you contain me in a box, When I am meant to be a star?
Dear Andrea,*

Your brother lost a colleague in his department this week. He was 41 years old and had recently been diagnosed with a congenital heart condition. He had been having a few problems, but had been doing pretty well; he was teaching virtually as well as building cabinets (for us) in his shop as a way to relax. One day while on Zoom with a student, he collapsed, went out of view from the screen and was gone. His wife was home at the time, but despite her and the EMT’s efforts, he was gone.

You may or may not know this, but that is essentially what happened with my dad. He was a bit older, but he had been at work for the day, had come home and finished the receipts, had taken mom out for coffee at their favorite truck stop and was actually driving them home when he collapsed at the wheel as they were driving back into town. I am thankful for my mom’s ability to keep her cool and steer the car to the side of the road or the event could have been more tragic. Before that occurred, we had developed the routine of talking to Mom and Dad every Monday night. I had just had a conversation with Dad 2 days prior to this event. The content of our discussion was not different than usual, but I do remember that he had been to the ENT where they had cleaned out the debris in his ear, allowing him to hear better than usual. We talked about life and normal stuff but we were able to talk a bit longer.

Because Dad was resuscitated at the scene of his collapse, they had put him on life support. In reality, this was to allow all of us to get home and say “good-bye.” Even as I sat with him and sang to him that night, I knew he was already gone. I wished that I had more time with him, but I was grateful for the time we did have. Thankfully, we still talk to Mom every week. She has done remarkably well these past 9 years without Dad. She has always been a strong and independent woman and has instilled that in her daughters as well. I know she misses Dad, but she is also joyful in her community, her church, and in her ability to spend time with others. Each week we also talk to your folks. We talk about common events, how things are going on both ends, and what is going on in our lives. Lately, my conversations with your dad have become times of sharing ideas, asking questions in both directions, thinking out loud about what might be happening in a particular situation, exploring our hopes and frustrations about the world in which we are currently living, and other topics that come up. And each time I hang up, I think about you. He is your dad and has so much wisdom and love that he is ready to share every week. Though I am grateful to have these moments in light of not being able to talk to my own dad, I also desire them for you.

The grief that we all collectively and continually are dealing with can, at times, be overwhelming and it has certainly brought many to despair. But I have also had more clarity about what is really important in my life, and a desire to communicate some of those things with those that I love and care for.

In the midst of the pandemic, pain and loss have become magnified for me. The grief that we all collectively and continually are dealing with can, at times, be overwhelming and it has certainly brought many to despair. But I have also had more clarity about what is really important in my life, and a desire to communicate some of those things with those that I love and care for. If this seems a bit odd that I am sending this to you right now, feel free to say what we say almost daily at my work, “blame it on Covid.” I don’t have any definitive action that I am hoping will come out of this. But I do want to communicate that I really care about you, think of you very often, and know that your dad (and mom as well) would love to share life with you. It could be a call, text, or email. They do all three…

I love you.
Julie*

*Written to a sister-in-law who has been estranged from the family for many years. Names changed.
THIRD YEAR MOMENTS
Martina Penalosa, MS3

I am a clueless flower trying to make it in all this chaos
your hand, an anchor, says, “don’t worry. I’ll see you when you wake again.”
your trust is a gift. i do not know you, yet you trust your life with me.
yet I know you, and have seen the parts of You that have no gets to see.

wake up to the dark. listen to your breath, your heart. the sun has risen.
don’t you hate the dread: your name approaches too soon, waiting to be called.
I answer; it feels like my small pebbles of knowledge escape from your past
three years—a long time. will I even recognize myself in the end?
You’ve made me happy. and yet I am a shadow of who I want to be.
I’ve given so much, playing in this bittersweet game of joy and loss
fell asleep for months aerospace engineer with hyper reflexes
to distract yourself you played tennis until your arm became too weak
the tears you held in fall. i sit with you, silent. comfort of tissues.
your husband gives you all. casinos were your shared place; now he goes alone.
drink to forget; you worry for your wife, your son. I worry for you.

you love music and have new dreams for yourself but no one here listens
sir, sir, how are you? can you close your eyes for me? smile, puff out your cheeks!

You call out his name the stranger you tried to save trapped in your prison
bleach and solitude quiet house, noisy memories escape from your past

The rain falls down: oh, to walk a little longer with the gray, wet sky.
two small pills to take. you want me to cheer for you, not to celebrate.
I just met you but hey, we both love the first two insidious films!

with one lollipop all the screaming and the fear of shots disappear
“There’s no blood,” you say with surprise. “Want a bandaid?” I ask you. “Yes please!”
your laugh is a bell you toe-walk down the hall and like my heart, you skip.

I’m so tired of this—no time to care for myself, still I keep going.

it’s just the worst thing when you work hard but you think you are not enough
look away. look back your warm eyes say everything: your words to my heart.
each day the x-ray shows your sickness grow smaller. you take a deep breath.

let me take the time to teach you why we do what we do. ask anything.
i drink water for the first time in eight hours and remember to eat

gowns, masks, gloves all on pump out hand sanitizer walk into the room.
when you said to me, “You are beyond your years,” my heart was very humbled
If you’re not second guessing yourself then are you even on third year?

purple dots on your legs, you tell me to turn while you swallow your pills
you have been through so much, I know you want to go home, see your sister.
you don’t need to speak a word, one smile from you will brighten my whole day.

This cute two year old—he sits up for me to hear his small, wheezy lungs

For the first time, I feel confident enough to tell you today’s plan
you look to me like i have the answers. but to be honest, I don’t.

there is a hallway where I can collect my thoughts, walk alone, and think.
I’m not sure if the free lunch makes up for the loss that is my free time

see you near the end: a witness to the last few moments of your life.

code blue is the blur and I stand in the corner watch your face grow pale
i see you hold on to life with each dying breath, gone by the day’s end.

what is comfort care? we pull the IV lines and our spirit can rest.
you are so nervous but afterwards, you should be proud of how much you’ve grown.
CLOUDY SUNSET | Anndre Nichol, MS1

ONLY EMPEROR
Elizabeth Silverman, MS4

This is a work of creative nonfiction. Some names and identifying features have been changed to protect the identity of certain parties.

The woman stroked her daughter’s sweet-soaked forehead as she struggled to breathe. A new rash had bloomed overnight on the girl’s chest, and she scratched it, leaving superficial excoriations. When the girl was left alone for a few seconds, she fell into a deep sleep.

The girl made throaty, gurgling sounds while she slept. Once, it was a humorous snoresmiley. Her mother still laughed a little when she did it. “Oh yes, she’s always sounded like this!” but now, to the rest of the medical team, it was a sound that alarmed us, and we woke her far too often because of it. When she wasn’t sleeping or itching her new rash, she was coughing up blood. Little streaks and speckles of bright red filled the cuffed white-cored cups we gave her.

One month earlier, the girl was running outside with her friends playing soccer under the California sun. She played video games and stayed up late with her siblings watching movies. After several appointments with her pediatrician, she visited the emergency department. She played video games and stayed up late with her siblings watching movies. After several appointments with her pediatrician, she visited the emergency department. She played video games and stayed up late with her siblings watching movies. After several appointments with her pediatrician, she visited the emergency department. She played video games and stayed up late with her siblings watching movies.

The hyperbaric technician, a blonde, happy-go-lucky twenty-something who I never saw without a smile immediately perked up and demanded specifics.

“Okay, what are your favorite movies?”

The hyperbaric technician said, “I can’t handle scary movies. I’m out.”

I described plots to various horror movies—a group of female spelunkers and the creatures that chased them, a mystery high school slaughter flick, an ancient curse that summoned demons and the temptations the small-town heroes faced, and they were judged either “scary” or “not scary.” The girl even encouraged the fellow to give horror a chance, and the fellow reluctantly acquiesced. A few times, the girl’s heart rate rose when she became very excited describing the greatest horror movie villains of all time and the fellow kindly tried to change the subject to something a little droller, “what is your favorite class?”

We encouraged the girl to rest if she was tired, but she was electric, gurgulating wildly, excitedly bringing up one topic after another: favorite board games, favorite video games, favorite animals, best actors, baked goods. Often, we would mention a movie or game she never heard of and she would say “I’ll watch that!” or “I’ll play that!” I’m not sure if it was the increased oxygen, the chance to talk about something other than her illness, or a combination of both, but she was animated and lively, transformed from the girl who I saw outside of the chamber. It was only the intermittent coughing and the precarious vital signs that reminded me of why she was with us in the first place.

After we completed the dive, she was exhausted. Sometimes she would gurgle and moan, and we quickly woke her, checking her breathing. She looked around groggily and then went back to sleep.

Her mother was waiting for her, and I thanked all of us for staying for her daughter’s solo dive. I could not imagine the stress and pain the mother felt, and yet, she still took the time to thank us. The team from the pediatric hospital wheeled our patient away in a stretcher. After the dive, the fellow sat with me for a while after the attending physician left. I knew that it was very likely that the girl would die.

“That was... really hard,” I admitted. “You hold onto these last two hours and you will never forget her,” the fellow instructed. “Also, she smiled a little ‘it’s ten,’”

That was my last day on that rotation. I followed the girl’s charts religiously. She did not go back to the Hyperbaric chamber. Day by day I saw her decline measured by increasing oxygen requirements, blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate. She changed her own code status to “Do Not Resuscitate.” The notes I read from the social worker said that she was afraid to die, and I broke a little. None of it was fair. She was completely healthy a few months before, and I felt myself raging at whatever force in the universe was responsible for such horrors. She had so many movies to watch, books to read, things to do, and she was so excited about doing them. I thought back to her mother touching her hair, brushing it away from her face. She was so loved.

She died a few days after I ended the rotation. Her parents were at her bedside when she passed. I carry her with me now, and I cherish the hours we spent together talking about what seemed like trivial things.

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That was my last day on that rotation.
My niece Evi was born with ileal atresia, which was successfully repaired a few days after birth. She spent the next month in the NICU, feeding and growing and melting our hearts with videos of her hiccups on the family group chat. Shortly after Christmas she was set to be discharged home when she became seriously ill. Emergency surgery showed a twisted intestine and partial bowel death. Because she was already missing a significant portion of her intestine due to ileal atresia, the surgeon chose to leave the abdominal incision open overnight with hopes that her bowel would heal once untwisted.

The next morning, I was woken by a phone call from my sister. “She’s not going to make it.” Instead of healthy pink bowel, the surgeon had found complete bowel death and Evi died a few hours later in my sister’s arms. I couldn’t help but feel that she might still be alive had the surgeon cut out the dead portion the day before.

That night I stumbled through a shift on Labor and Delivery, watching wailing babies being placed on their mothers’ chests. I worked with the resident who had delivered my own daughter just a year prior and showed her my nicely healed C-section incision and a picture of my Rosie. I was struck by the intimacy of our profession.

Because of COVID pandemic restrictions, I was unable to meet Evi until her funeral. There, I stroked her stiff, cold, and perfect face, and watched my sister gently kiss her forehead before closing the tiny coffin.

A few weeks later, I went to an appointment for my new pregnancy and found that the baby had no heartbeat. I had a D&C the next week in one of the Hillcrest operating rooms. After months of being the least important person in the OR, it was strange to see my name written in large letters on top of the OR whiteboard under “PATIENT” instead of crammed into the corner under “Medical Student.”

Almost a year later, I sat with my sister over Thanksgiving turkey, both of us now pregnant with boys due a week apart. She said, “It must have been hard to be that surgeon who decided to leave Evi another day. He couldn’t have known what would happen. He just wanted the best for her.”

Her soft understanding hit my grudge like a ton of bricks. I was ashamed that I, a future doctor who had already made numerous mistakes, had blamed a surgeon I had never met for my grief surrounding my niece’s death.

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I've seen you before.
You only have so much time:
Sweet, old, tired eyes
that light up when I
ask if I can sit with you
and Be for a while.

"Can you stay with me? Everyone passes, but no one stays by my side.
when I first met you the Love of your life sat by your side, held your hand.

he was your Voice, asked all the right questions, and he knew your heart, your soul.

"He loves you so much," I say while I listen to your heartbeat. "I know."
Your cancer had spread, And you knew you had months, but now maybe just days.

And so, I sat and You showed me pictures of when You travelled the world
The man in pictures Looked so different from you your eyes are the same.

You spent your savings on a home by the sea, where your happiness rests:
eyes open to the hopeful horizon, and close with the setting sun.

"If I should go to Any place, where should I go?" I ask you. You breathe with eyes closing, "Oh, this wonderful café in Bologna," and sleep.

While Love was away, I came in the morning to Check on how you slept.
It was my last day. You took my hand and said that you would miss me so.

Walking to my car I brushed a tear from my eye and remembered This.
A few days pass and I think of you, check your chart. My heart, it flutters
as I see that you passed just two days earlier, and I cant help but think of our time when I sat with you for those ten Minutes. I saw a glimpse:
of your life, your Love, your joy, and dreams that made you—like that Bologna café.
I hope you know I’m thankful for the time we had. Sweet, old, tired eyes.

apocalypse means to reveal
Abyan Mama, MS2
is the volume in my voice
or in my shade.

disruption in my actions
or in our history.

is the violence in my heart
or in my curls.

Black girl, let me share a truth:
you are never too loud.
not in a world that only wishes for our silence.
EXCELLENCE IN MEDIOCRITY
Carson McCann, MS1

Medical school and medicine often attracts some of the brightest, most driven people society has to offer. The cost of admission, far deeper than the financing of loans, is composed of the time, effort, and sacrifices one took to try to convince a committee that they can strive to be excellent from classroom to clinic. The fierce competition for a clinic. The fierce competition for a
demanding diligence
cost of admission, far deeper than the
driven people society has to offer. The
drives toward excellence in medicine. In fact, you bury this vanity
understanding that any remnants of
hubris stands opposed to the core values
of medicine. The white coat ceremony stands as the climactic
event between your vanity and the core values of medicine. The white coat ceremony stands as the climactic
of any medical student will
Medical school and medicine often

So deep to preclude any perceptibility
of earning that letter. The years of work needed to earn admission
more often than not instills more than a
basic belief in oneself. Though to varying
degrees for each student, the pendulum
often swings into a zone of hubris. You
know that you are going to one day
come a doctor because you have
outpaced many of your peers in that same
cycle. This pride, no matter how big or
small, is inevitable in the majority of
matriculants. However, it must be
suppressed beyond recognition.
Medicine is an honorable career path.
You were chosen because a committee
believed you will uphold a major value in
your life. And best of all, the closest people in your
family member threatens the visibility of
an advisor and celebratory hug from a
friend, fellow committee member.
And so you bury that pride deep down,
understanding that any remnants of
hubris stands opposed to the core values of medicine. In fact, you bury this vanity

However, this inflation of ego stands as
your greatest challenge to your humility.
You have reached a new peak, unlike
what you have known before.

But that prideful moment of white
cap ceremony is swiftly met with the
humbling experience of meeting your
new peers. These wonderful people you
have the fortune to call friends earned
their spot next to you in their own,
unique way. Some of your classmates
were champions of sport—competing in
national championships or Olympic
games. Others were well accomplished in
academic medicine, authoring numerous
papers in journals you had only dreamed
of submitting to. Many of your classmates
donated considerable time and effort to rectifying social injustices in
their communities with tangible results.

And yet, it persists.
As floods unearth what is buried in
the ground, the excitement and
anticipation of starting medical school
scares your pride ever closer to the
surface. Every congratulatory email from an
advisor and celebratory hug from a
family member threatens the visibility of
your pride coming across to others. But
you do your best to bury it anyway.

Finally, your days of medical school
start. In the same fashion as every
medical school in the nation, the white
cap ceremony stands as the climactic
event between your vanity and the core values of medicine. The white coat
ceremony is the ultimate celebration of
your arduous efforts to become a doctor.
And best of all, the closest people in your

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their communities with tangible results.
And plenty of your classmates were
interviewed and accepted at schools
where you were met with rejection. In
every case, your pride for a letter received
months earlier implodes within its tomb
below any facade. Suddenly you
experience impostor syndrome, perhaps
for the first time in your life. You
question if there was some kind of
mistake. Surely, you do not measure up
to the same level as these people you
somehow call your peers. At best, you are
mediocre.

However, this doubt eventually
blossoms into something else entirely.
As tests come and go and you progress
through your first year, you realize that
you can perform as well as many of your
classmates. Although you may not
receive the top marks you came to expect
in college, you have the confidence that at
least you can tread water alongside your
classmates. And in due course, you
discern the greatest lesson in the
challenges medical school puts forth:
your greatest asset are your peers.
Although any single one of your peers
may be better than you in a given activity
or subject, there is not a single
imaginable or medical capability. We
each have our own experience and
testimonials to offer. What used to be
an ego upon entry, whether we like to admit it or not,
through the trials and tribulations of
medicine our hubris metamorphoses
into a deep appreciation of others’
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Lost In Translation

Brett Taylor, MS2

“Had I been trained to see brains as biological objects—as they indeed are—organs built from cells and fed by blood. But in psychiatric illness, the organ itself is not damaged in a way we can see, as we can visualize a fractured leg or a weakly pumping heart. It is not the brain’s blood supply but rather its hidden communication process, its internal voice, that struggles. There is nothing we can measure, except with words—the patient’s communications, and our own.” — Karl Deisseroth, “Projections”

A desire to become a psychiatry manager was born the moment that I learned about Free Clinic. Studying neuroscience and philosophy as an undergraduate student, I was always interested in psychiatry as one of the many paths that I could take further. My undergraduate experience, however, was not particularly focused on psychiatry. I was more interested in clinical medicine, but I felt reaffirmed in my pursuit once I saw the first “Step” in clinical medicine. For example, in the “unprecedented times of Covid-19,” all of our encounters were relegated to “Zooms” taken from a bedroom. Maybe a more trivial consequence of a global pandemic but blurred background filters and talking into the void (“your mic is off!”) became the norm. These technologies added an extra layer of technicalities to these visits, another mediator of human connection and intimacy. And even without the pandemic, I faced many unanticipated challenges. I had thought I could empathize and put myself in my patient’s shoes. But with fears of deportation, worries about housing security, and histories punctuated by intimate partner violence, let alone lives entrenched in chronic illnesses such as diabetes or lupus, how could I? Empathy quickly became sympathy: a recognition of endured hardship and an extension of remorse rather than directly tapping into what these patients were experiencing in the world. One of the most notable challenges shared by most who work with the Free Clinic, though, is translation:

“The truth is you already know what it’s like. You already know the difference between the size and speed of everything that flushed through you and the tiny inadequate bit of it all you can ever let anyone know. As though inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all somehow squeezed out through one of those tiny keyholes,” David Foster Wallace, “Oblivion”

Wallace’s quote speaks to the inability to capture our lived experiences and share them in an authentic way with others. The words we wield are a translation of that experience, and even with constant practice, an amount of time that far exceeds the 10,000 “required” for mastery, they fail to authentically communicate how we interface with the world. Communication of that experience when it is colored by suffering poses an even larger challenge, requiring a level of vulnerability that is likely unnatural with a near stranger. This is a challenge in medicine and probably the challenge in psychiatry: “But in psychiatric illness…There is nothing we can measure, except with words—the patient’s communications, and our own.” But for Free Clinic, Deisseroth’s quote needs to be reworked to incorporate translators. While indispensible, translation provides yet another level of mediation, another sieve through which words, already a translation of experience, become transmuted once again. It is an enormous task. An impossible one really. Words are spoken quickly, moods are intonated subtly, and emotions are aired heavily; timing and pacing are shaped by loud silences; and much can be lost. But perhaps something more, something precious, can be found too:

“Life is a train of moods like a string of beads and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus. To find oneself trapped in any one bead, no matter what it’s hue, can be deadly. And now, I think, we can say: a glass bead may flush the world with color, but it alone makes no necklace.” — Maggie Nelson, “Bluets”

One of my last days as a psychiatry manager was special for a lot of reasons. I had a patient who had a long history with Downtown Psychiatry. I had seen her a few months prior and remembered her well. EPIC charted her relatively unchanging history and reflected the rigidity that depression often imposes on one’s life. “In Bluets,” Nelson articulates this shared experience: “There is simply no way that a year from now you’re going to feel the way you feel today,” a different therapist said to me last year at this time.

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But though I have learned to act as if I feel differently, the truth is that my feelings haven’t really changed.” Last encounter, the physician and I decided to double our patient’s dose of medication in hopes of breaking her free from congealed patterns of thought and finding spaces where entropy reigns supreme. This encounter, we aimed to check in with her and to identify what changes could be made to help her further, but shortly after her camera flickered on, it was apparent the latter would be unnecessary:


But her face, her tone, and her body language radiated much more. She cleared things up: “This pill sits well with me.” She bursts with energy, and now “nothing, not even a sprained ankle, can slow me down,” she says. The words were translated, yes, but I began to pay more attention to the types of communication that escapes words. Her intonation overlapped with joy. It was going to be “good news.” I knew, before the words reached my ears. The length at which she talked, stitching together moments of her life, nonverbally articulated an excitement that had previously been absent. The translator’s smile provided another window into the patient. It was one of those true authentic smiles that signalized not only the patient sharing something new and full of optimism but also their own connection and relationship. There are so many obstacles, so many words, and so much more lost in translation, but here I learned to attend to, to connect with, and to listen to patients—to people—in new ways. And in that, I found a reinvigorated source of passion to continue along my journey.

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A NIHILIST’S JOURNEY

Alan Aung, MS2

You told me, The Universe Is So Big
We Are One Blue Dot, Moving 67,000 Miles Per Hour Through An Endless Void
You told me, You Are Nothing, I Am Nothing,
You Mean Nothing, I Mean Nothing,

i say sure, maybe we mean nothing...
but i can hear your voice
it’s in my head, with perfect pitch and tone
i say, and we’re here, alive
I tug on your sleeve—a dark midnight blue, blending into dim city lights

You said, What Does It Matter?
There’s Eons Gone By, And Eons To Come
The Earth Doesn’t Care
We’re Here For Two Minutes. We’ll All Be Gone Soon.
And Even Then,
Even Then, Time Won’t Stop.

we walk, for some time
and the time starts to fade
into the sky filled with stars
covered by a dark smoggy gray

I invade the silence
I say, so what if we’re gone soon?
Two Minutes...
Two Minutes could be a long time
A song could be sung
A baby could be born
A smile could be spread.

The tip tap of our footsteps interlace
with the midnight city pigeons
calling their caw caws
And a mom passes by
with bags under her eyes
pushing a dainty black stroller
bounding its tiny jingling bells

I crack a smile
And I think you do too
but the lights aren’t so bright
as we stroll to your place
at this time of night

you say, I still don’t like how,
how we’re only here for a while
like what can I do?
just work till I die?
that sounds like poo
no, it’s some hot fiery shit

We pause at your elevator
All tarnished and brown
It dings as we enter
Without making much sound
But as we rise it grumbles
Shaky and tired
It stops on floor four

I say, You can do so much more than that.
I’m not sure that that’s true.
What about your music?
Ugh, We both know it’s not very good.
Oh cmon, you know that’s not true,
And even if you think so,
At least you love it

You jingle your keys
And let us both in
A worn down studio home
Reeking of ash and old trash

Lit by flickery bulbs without shades
Turning themselves off and then on
Under this odd shade of lighting
You pick up the aux cord
And plug yourself in

I say, I love this song’s melody.
You can make people happy.

You sigh and think, sure.
But finally say, I’m not so happy.
I brew us some tea
And stir in some honey
With a tiny fruit fork
Trying to be funny
It kinda works

Thanks for making the tea,
you say with half a smile

I say, There’s that stupid smile
Are these some new leaves?

Yes, I got them on sale

They taste pretty good
Probably better with food
So you fry up some dumplings
I walk up and say, it’s all about those little things

Like your deal on this tea
And this sturdy old skillet
Or the verticality on this song’s harmony
Cmon, I know you love that weird theory stuff

We slouch onto the couch
Horizontally in harmony
With our hot plates of food
you softly say, i do love theory

I told you, I’m Making One
My Theory Is That We Have Enough To Be Happy
This Food, This Music, This Couch, Every One of Your Breaths,
It’s All Enough - More Than Enough
To Be Happy
You, You Are Enough
To be happy

you smile and it shows
you question my prose
but what about all that we don’t have?
and our lack of time here?

Look, I’m Not Saying We Have It All
In Fact, I Still Think Your Lighting is Completely Fucked Up
But It Really Doesn’t Matter
’Cause We’re Only Here For A Little While
And In Our Two Minutes Here
We Have Enough
To Spread Some Smiles

your smile busts into a laugh
You say, Screw You, I Love These Lights
Even If They Might Be Just A Little
Teensy Tiny Bit
Off
SITTING IN A LECTURE ON CANCER
Kanchi Mehta, MS1

Sitting in a Lecture on Cancer
All I can think about is her
Wide smile, the kind with eyes that crinkle at the corners
Strong opinion on what made something “hipster”
Love for One Direction (especially Harry)
Sharing clothes with me so that our closets became mixed
Holding my hands and patiently teaching me to ice skate
Talking about changing the world as a politician
And how we’d grow up to take on this thing called life as friends forever

As the lecturer goes on about leukemia
All I can think about is her
Saying she’s so tired
not hungry
her leg hurts
her joints ache
Telling me that they caught it early
That the chances of recovery were high
That there was hope

As the lecturer goes on about rates of remission
All I can think about is her
Hair falling out
Clothes getting looser
A bleakness taking over the shine in her eyes
Hands, that could write in calligraphy and draw cartoons, becoming too fragile to hold a pencil
A voice, that could argue loudly and passionately, becoming quiet and out of breath

It isn’t fair, it isn’t fair, it isn’t fair
She was barely 21
All I can think about as the lecturer goes on
Is that the future we talked about became a myth

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A MORNING IN DERM CLINIC
Mason Price, MS3

Hi!
Really busy today, and down one attending
50 patients?
Ever heard of bullous pemphigoid?
My wife’s having surgery soon, all happening at once
That’s life, huh?
Snappy, quick, efficient
Spray spray
Snip
Cut
Running behind
Monkey bladder
I’m a hundred and one!
19 years old, wedding ring on his finger
From California
His wife was just reading a letter from him
We had to drag him up the hill
That’s the saddest thing in the world
Beefy, indurated plaque
Cutaneous horn
Erythematous, scaly plaques
Nodule
That one drained on its own!
Can you measure that?
Be precise
Lidocaine
Razor
Cautery
Vacuum the smell
Your skin looks great!
You come to the dermatologist sunburned?!
Go draw up some Kenalog, 5 mgs per mil
Big needle?
Good luck with school
Scoot around
Four-person dance
Shirt off, shirt on
Gown on gown off
Freeze
And my wife just died last month
Heart drops
Just 67
There’s never a good time
I suppose no one lives long enough without great loss
Deep pain
Even in a dermatology clinic
Spray spray
See you in 6 months
Go home
There’s a chapel in the hospital on my way out
It’s quiet there.
WAVES OF PAIN
Tanya Jain, MS1

When my Dadaji died I was walking around a fountain in a park in Boston, staring at how the water rippled when it was disturbed. A week ago I had visited him in the hospital, the one I was born in, the one my uncle died in, the one where life and death exchange with one another interminably. I remember he told me that he didn’t think he could win against the pain. It was like he could see it from miles away, like a terrible, towering wave advancing, but all he could do was hold his breath. I remember the tubes and the pain charts, the feeling of death in the room. I remember standing in the corner, my hands cupping one another, feeling terrified and lost as nurses ran by and wheezes echoed across the floor. I remember the feeling of death even at home when I walked down the hallway from my room to his, where carbon dioxide turned to carbon monoxide, where words were spoken out of a hole in the neck, a black hole that went for miles, past his wrinkling skin and sunken eyes, past his blackened teeth from years of chewing tobacco, that hidden bearer of death that sat in a wet clump on the corner of the table that I never dared touch. I remember the moans and indecipherable cries, the unimaginable pain. The pain of being cut open and cut apart, of losing parts of yourself one by one, losing your tongue, your voice box, the roof of your mouth, your skin, your neck. I remember the glossectomy, the maxillectomy, the laryngectomy, surgeries that both saved his life and lengthened his dying. His death was spread out like that soft warm dough for making mathris always was after he dipped it in ghee and smoothed it with the balen. He grew weary with pain. The word became his life, the word that wheezed out of the hole in his mouth and appeared in shaky letters on notepads he struggled to write on. The word beckoned bottles of pills and an IV drip, a drug-induced fog that was impossible to climb out of and made the days blend together. I’m not sure he recognized me from that fog. I’m not sure he wanted to, I was a stranger who found him sad and scary, a stranger who had never seen death, who couldn’t begin to comprehend what it was like to stare it in the face, a stranger so soaked in youth and hope that to even acknowledge the existence of pain was a sin. But my Dadaji lived for years like this, years of pain. There was no alternative. He had to exist and his existence was pain. Every day was like thousands of terrible waves hitting his body, until one day he finally drowned in them.

COMFORT
| Navtej Grewal, MS4

You say you hear
You say you see
You say you understand
Yet you don’t take a stand.

People hear you more
People see you more
People respect you more
Yet you won’t lead the war.

I watch kids insulted
I watch elderly shoved
I watch innocent arrested
Yet you never protested.

Bystander
Regina Wang, MD

We can’t stay silent
We can’t just hide
We can’t turn a cheek
’Til you act and speak.

You are for or against us
You are choosing your path
And right what’s unjust.

In your home it begins
In your work you support
To end structural hate.

Will you listen to our stories?
Will you treat us as your own?
Will you use your privilege to fight
And join the struggle to make it right?
I first saw her, leaning on a counter just in front of several opened wine bottles and a stack of clear plastic wine cups.

"Pot" I thought because I had smoked it a few times in the past and it had little effect on me, that is if you did not count eating restaurant sized bags of corn chips at one time. Embarrassing? Of course.

David introduced me to one of his friends, a pale woman with curly brown hair and an initially attractive but overall sour disposition. After a few words she offered to me by a pudgy disheveled medical student who resembled a young Alan Ginsberg. "No big deal smoking the weak stuff, you know?" I thought because I had smoked it a few times in the past and it had little effect on me, that is if you did not count eating restaurant sized bags of corn chips at once. Embarrassing? Of course.

I turned the corner, now feeling the music from Star Wars—choked with static from my dying radio—blared and the Disney cartoon chipmunks Chip and Dale Giggle. Her laugh reminded me of a glass of red wine would make me less anxious. I was only slightly high and was looking for "a healthy target" and suddenly step on the gas pedal. The noise was pure Japanese (third generation, sansei) and her father was "mostly Chinese ancestors as well. I held her line with my marijuana-addled heart as we walked up stairs to reach her tiny apartment. Could she hear it? The apartment was decorated Hawaiian style with flowers, pictures of epic surf and even a two-foot carved Tiki. It had been more than a year since I had any female physical contact and quite a bit longer since I had a stable relationship. I knew by now they stood out like red beacons, and past occurrences resulted in merciless teasing from my friends with remarks such as "Hey Rudolph, won't you guide my sleigh tonight?" My heart was pounding again. I loved breathing her scented perfume. What the hell besides peppermint was in the fragrance?

Amazingly, I felt suspended in a dreamy space. I no longer worried about my job as a social work assistant, lately chased down the street by a furious mentally ill homeless man who deemed our promises of help as woefully inadequate while my boss and I cursed former governor Ronald Reagan and his "just say no" wife Nancy for closing detoxification centers and half-way houses. I no longer obsessed about moving out from my place in Palms, away from my perpetually stoned roommate and out of the 110-degree cramped apartment that was relentlessly 24/7 heated from the laundry room just below us.

"For the moment I no longer cared about my roommate’s latest escapade that was one of a never-ending stream of ‘red flags.’ He was borrowing my Mustang, which was very out of tune, and using it to "smoke out" unsuspecting joggers as they labored up the rough pathways on San Vicente. He would pounce on a "healthy target" and suddenly step on the gas pedal. The noise alone startled the hapless victims, but then they were engulfed in an acrid cloud of oily smoke, worse than ten LA Unified School buses. As they cursed, their eyes tearing, gasping for breath, my roommate giggled hysterically as he made his "citizen’s escape."

But in this moment, I existed in a universe of no pain, no boredom, firmly in the realm of pleasure now.

"Sure, you are just saying that to get in my pants? Although it could work," she giggled. Her laugh reminded me of Disney cartoon chipmunks Chip and Dale and I made myself too. “No, no, I like the Hawaiian photos and flowers,” I pleaded. Meanwhile the pants remark and her flirtatious reply caused my face to flush and my ears to become red. I know now they stood out like red beacons, and past occurrences resulted in merciless teasing from my friends with remarks such as "Hey Rudolph, won’t you guide my sleigh tonight?" My heart was pounding again. I loved breathing her scented perfume. What the hell besides peppermint was in the fragrance?

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"I turned the corner, now feeling the effects of whatever else was in the joint I smoked. I was only slightly high and was sure I was safe to drive, but in retrospect my space-time perception might have been altered. Suddenly, I was on the freeway and two large trucks riding in the two right lanes rode their horns. ‘No! No! Way! It
can’t be. ’Now I was enraged, enraged at my compulsion to make things perfect and angry with a city that places freeway ramps in quiet residential neighborhoods. Worse, there appeared to be no near off ramps, no signage (signature Los Angeles) and I was running out of gas as the two enormous cargo trucks, now in front, further impaired my vision!’ “I have to get back to Burgundy!” I shouted to no one in particular. My whole life is now wrapped up in this developing relationship—not just the physical aspect I told myself. I needed Sophia. I needed someone and something to look forward to. However, the effects of my intoxication were now apparent. I could not concentrate well, and distance and time were distorted. No question. I exited on the first off ramp and tried to recompute, and this turned out to be very difficult given all the signs appeared to be in Chinese. I knew Monterey Park near where Sophia lived had a large Chinese population and this was in clear evidence and when I attempted to get directions from a middle-aged, strolling man, he only smiled and spoke directions in Chinese, gesturing in both directions. Disappointed, I made a screeching illegal U-turn and got back on the freeway going in the opposite direction. No Burgundy off ramp appeared but I managed to get back on Valley View, a major surface street. Better yet, I saw a gas station and I turned in, tires complaining and pulled next to a pump. I went up to the dusty booth where examples of counterfeit bills were displayed up front. I admired the one-dollar bill that someone used a crude white marker to place a zero after the one.

Behind what appeared to be bulletproof glass, I saw a young man about my age who was, according to the stenciled name on his stained blue uniform, named Jorge. He told me his ‘idiot cousin’ accepted the phony bill. He came out from his protective cage and showed me a silver barreled revolver, a bad smile wagging a disapproving finger in one hand, and showing me a silver barreled revolver in the other. Shocked, my heart pounding so hard I could feel it, I swerved to the far right, nearly scaring the ubiquitous freeway sound wall. I did not believe they would shoot me, but it was Saturday night. According to an ER doctor I sometimes worked with, that’s when the ‘Knife and Gun Club’ met in East Los Angeles. It appeared to be meeting now and I was on the agenda as new business.

The ER doctor also claimed that all shootings in LA were perpetrated by one person, a serial violent criminal known as ‘Some Dude’. ‘Some Dude,’ he explained, his tone absurdly serious, ‘as in I was minding my own business and for no reason, some Dude shot me!’ Ha Ha, very funny, I thought to myself, the back of my neck hairs now prickly with sweat, my head down with my eyes just above the steering wheel, as I imagined ‘Some Dude’ was about to take a bead on my person. Meanwhile truckers behind me were again blaring their horns becoming impatient. To make matters worse, the driver behind me turned his brights on, but even in the blinding glare I could see his mirror image flipping me off. I saw an off ramp just up ahead and I thought ‘Oh hell yes!’ and I made my escape, at first pretending I was going past it but at the last second, swerving, tires screeching to barely make it to the off ramp. The gun car did not follow. I would live.

I made several quick turns onto residential streets and was overwhelmed with relief that I was not followed. I was jubilant as I could now pursue my desperate quest to find Sophia and I began to study street signs. The first one I could actually read, undamaged and legible was Burgundy! It was nearly two hours since I began my wine journey, and to my dismay the street was long with nearly twenty identical apartment buildings on either side of the street. I must have moved her car because I could not find the red VW bug I had followed. I walked up and down the street but none of the apartments looked exactly right and showing me a silver barreled revolver in the other.

Despair overwhelmed me. I did not know her last name and did not know which nursing school Sophia attended but I was on the agenda as new business. As I squinted, I could make out a moving, white uniformed figure, her beautiful black hair tied back and covered by the cap. I took a deep breath because my vision was still impairing my vision, and her sweet concern affirmed my grandmother’s sage observation that it is far better to be born lucky, than born rich or clever.

I soon parked in the Amigos Neighborhood Market, my car fitting in nicely with other battered cars, many without license plates. I wondered how they got by the police. I also noticed some toughs making drug deals off to the side of the market, out of sight of the heavily armed security guard standing without expression in the doorway. I bought a bottle of red wine, a cheap Merlot, the only type of red wine I could stand to drink. I hurried back to my car, opened the door quickly and tossed the bottle in my brown bag next to the unpainted fender. Back on the freeway, I searched for the elusive Burgundy exit, assuming it existed. I suppose I just concentration and may have cut off the vehicle behind me. Suddenly, a dark sedan appeared alongside and even with me. It contained three glaring tattooed teenagers. The sole occupant of the back seat stopped glaring and smiled, slowly wagging a disapproving index finger in one hand, and showing me a silver barreled revolver in the other. Shocked, my heart pounding so hard I could feel it, I swerved to the far right, nearly scaring the ubiquitous freeway sound wall. I did not believe they would shoot me, but it was Saturday night. According to an ER doctor I sometimes worked with, that’s when the “Knife and Gun Club” met in East Los Angeles. It appeared to be meeting now and I was on the agenda as new business.

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fact after fact
that one classic triad
that one triple whammy

fact
after
fact

i put my fact-cramming to the test
a block of 10 Step 1 practice questions
okay question 1

looks like it’s a congenital cardiac anomaly
i just did a question yesterday about that
but what was the answer...

i just learnt this
it’s in my mind somewhere
i know it is

how could i forget
how could i
forget
i forgot
i keep forgetting
this is the 3rd time today

only 3 questions right, 30%
i know i just started studying for step 1
and it’s still more than 3 months away

but 30% won’t cut it
30% won’t be a doctor
30% won’t let you achieve what you’ve
always dreamt of

why is it still a dream
isn’t it enough
that i made it this far

there’s still a long road ahead
30% isn’t you
you were never 30%

but now that’s normal
30% is a miracle some days
but 30% won’t cut it

i tell myself that i have to do it for my future patients
that every fact crammed
could save someone’s life

30% won’t cut it for my future patients
30% won’t be there for my future colleagues
30% won’t save humanity from pain and suffering
i carry around that 30% like it defines me
as if someone is going to ask who i am
and i will answer with 30%

stop
breathe

30% doesn’t define me
30% isn’t me

30% is merely a score
just one score on one practice test
it’s practice for a reason
and every day i learn more and more

30% isn’t worth losing my mind
because if there is nothing left of my mind,
there is nothing that can be learnt
not one fact
not even 30%
SO THE WORLD CAME TO BE

Abyan Mama, MS2

There once was and there once wasn’t, and except for Odudua, the Supreme Creator, there was no-one.

The Creator started out, as all life does, compressed and curled. As being expanded, so too did Odudua. As the Creator stretched out, they came to be aware of their triplicate nature. We have named these faces Odudua, Olurun and Olodumare. Creation’s creator, orun, the heavens, and qe, the earth. Odudua remained both everywhere and nowhere. Olurun, the ruler of the heavens, settled into ruling the skies. Olodumare, conjoined orin and aga began their task as ruler to the earth.

Upon Olodumare’s first desire again they divided, this time into the first Orun: Olo-dù-ma-rè orun, the dark, and Yemoja, the light. Olodumare, the lord of the sea, ruled over the depths of the ocean, where the light never touches, embodying the ineffable depths of life’s first incubator. Yeye Omọjẹ, her other name which means the mother whose children are fishes, came to rule over the shallow waters, where the oceans meet the land. As it was in the Creator’s nature to be so, it was with Olodumare. As the depths of their seas are untroubled by trivialities and tumults, so too did the sea. Yemoja was different; born with the heart of a mother, she possesses a boundless love. A love that allows Yemoja to see beyond what is and what can be, to see and to birth potential in all. In this heart of love, double-edged as all swords are, came paired with a huge emptiness, for what is the love of a childless mother but suffering?

While Olukon drifted, forever restless, in the quiet deep: Yemoja, with her lonely heart, sunk to the sandy depths off her shallow waters. Suspended between shafts of light in the otherwise empty ocean she allowed the currents to move her—occasionally jumping from one tidal stream to another with a powerful flick of her indigo tail. She traveled the ocean in this manner for an age and an instant. One day and then all days she began to hum. Deep rumbles of sound emanating from where her belly met the sea, ringing ever louder in the ocean depths. These notes became the First Song, made of notes so esquisite they are painful in the sharp nature of their brilliance. So beautiful was the sound of this First Song, so powerful in its resonance, that it catalyzed the molecules of the primordial soup, bringing together friends and foes, transforming them into new entities. As Yemoja’s song grew more complex—splitting into new time signatures and developing canons—as too the ocean gave way to her sound. The prebiotic soup transformed all around her, birthing the first of her children.

Yemoja floated for another age and an instant, singing her life-giving song. Chemistry became biotechnology, cellular biology. All throughout the oceans entropy gave way to order, like dissolved only like and life made of matter began the work of being. Uneccentric became multi, prokaryote gave way to eu. Yemoja grew more invested with each new stage, each evolution filled with boundless potential in her loving eyes. Yemoja sang for an age and an instant. When the First Song finally ended, she sunk to the sandy depths of her shallow waters once more. Looked to her left and saw a full kelp forest, teeming with shools of fish and slow moving sharks; looked to her right and saw rainbow colored corals studded with iridescent neon fish. Yego onju, the mother whose children are fishes, smiled, for at last her ocean was full of offspring.

Then she began her Second Song, a song of protection and love. From this song grew the first of all living things, the first shimmers around the inanimate, the irunmọle orishas; and into the irunmọle shimmers like the second shimmers of Olodumare’s infinite divine spirit, carrying with it the power to create; alongside a piece of their ever-loving mother’s heart, which gave this power roots in love first and foremost. First she birthed Oshun’s and Oluwu’s, and Olofi, and she charged them with making all the animals of the earth, using their fish children as the key from which to shape their forms. Second she birthed Oshun, a daughter of love and sweet-water. For her children she laid the land, for which she surely need to drink, the ocean being as it was, part of the subsoil cells that powered their organic bodies after all.

Wherever Oshun flowed so did the river, taking Yego onju’s ei fish children, transforming them as they went. The further they migrated from their ocean origins and into Oshun’s sweet-water, the more their colors eroded; bright neon melting into muted pastels. The children of the earth Odudua and Oshun made spread and changed too. Some took to the skies with wings Oshun had birthed; others slithered legless into the soil, lived in a state of half-being within the earth. Some grew necks long and tall so they alone could reach the soft parts of thorn trees; others saw not with eyes but through the echoes cast by their squeaks. Some missed Yego onju so much they crawled back into the ocean packing on hibsher and melting pores into flippers as they went; others absorbed iron-sulfide shells and made a home in the heated hydrothermal vents of Oshun’s deep sea.

Yemoja sang for an age and an instant, When the Second Song came to a close, she regarded all she had birthed and smiled, for her mother’s heart was finally full. ***

Not all of Yemoja’s children were made the same. Some, humans much like yourselves, were born with an extra dose of Odudua’s creative spirit, the will to make the world of what is best suited to their desires. Among the humans, the half Odudua made in her image received more of Yemoja’s Love as well, balancing out this consumptive drive with a deep concern for life. But Oshun, drinking fermented wine as he worked, grew sloppy in his formation. While Oshun’s women carried within them a saltwater womb, an oceanic microcosm, portal for new life made in her image, connecting them always back to Yemoja’s womb. Olofi’s men were not guaranteed the same connection to her Love. It was planted within them, the same seed, but hungry for water. Some of these sons, failing to water the seed, grew dry desert hearts within, became increasingly bitter and enraged.

Yemoja drifted for an age and an instant, exploring the world, filled now to the brim with her children. First she visited the rivers and the lakes ruled by her daughter Oshun. Next, she slithered indigo tail, sprouting legs and walking the beaches and the marshes. She scaled the peaks of the tallest mountains, descended to the depths of the greatest valleys. Wherever she walked, her children greeted her, and she was happy. Last, she visited the humans.

Yemoja began in Africa, starting with those who called her name the loudest. For generations now the children of humanities oldest home presents to their shallow waters: strings of cowrie shells; rainbow jewels, that sparked as brightly as her belly and set all of their songs of gratitude, carried by Oyo’s winds all across her oceans. She walked among them for an age and an instant. The every-woman, eternal boundless mother of all, Olo onju, the mother whose children are fishes, so innumerable as to be uncountable. As she walked among her human children. Yemoja became aware of the far-reaching consequences of Orunmila’s experiment, possessed as some were by an imbalance.

From the Yoruba Old story of roughly translated to us the Distant’unanimous spirit form version of the land, God and capital-G.

• For the Yoruba, the sea, the ocean, is untroubled by trivialities and tumults, the untroubled of the oceans.

• Orin means: to strike. Orisha of thunder, lighting and fire Shango is said to cast a thunder-stone to earth towards any who offend him. Considered by many the orisha of vengeance, he can be quite the porcupine but always willing to channel wrath. Not a brother I would be happy to have as a son.

• Olodumare is the embodiment of knowledge and wisdom. Total insufferable know-it-all. Got too large a dose of the Creator’s spirit in my opinion. While this gives Orunmila power to create; alongside a piece of her mother’s heart, which gave this power roots in love first and foremost. First she birthed Oshun’s and Oluwu’s, and Olofi, and she charged them with making all the animals of the earth, using their fish children as the key from which to shape their forms. Second she birthed Oshun, a daughter of love and sweet-water. For her children she laid the land, for which she surely need to drink, the ocean being as it was, part of the subsoil cells that powered their organic bodies after all.

• Olodumare originally represented the Divine Feminine Spirit, the power of the word, which brings forth into existence. One of my favorite spiritual musings is that we are all Olodumare, the creative spirit of the earth. Can you imagine the moment of creation? The Creation story is an ancient tale of humanity’s oldest home sent presents to the earth, an oceanic microcosm, portal for new life made in her image, connecting them always back to Yemoja’s womb. Olofin’s men were not guaranteed the same connection to her Love. It was planted within them, the same seed, but hungry for water. Some of these sons, failing to water the seed, grew dry desert hearts within, became increasingly bitter and enraged.

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TWIN TREES, DEL MAR 2021 | Mokhshen Ramachandran, MS3

CONTINENTAL DRIFT | Anna Lussier, MS1
of spirits. In her walking she bore witness to the casual cruelty some did unto others, became conscious of the multi-foliate ways the potential she had encouraged could manifest.

It came to pass that the most distant of her children, ears deafened to the song of life by their harsh travels, returned to their first home on aqé, their earthy cradle of life. When first she sensed their mighty ships touch her ocean’s edges she danced with joy, excited to welcome them home to share in life’s endless bounty once more. However, Love was not what had drawn their distant children home.

When they docked on the shores, drawn sickly from their travels, they brought with them terrible weapons that exploded in a crack like Shango’s strike, spraying red death across the lands. Those they did not murder, they shackled in chains and packed aboard their ships to carry across her oceans.

Yemoja wept from an age and an instant. She wept with the furious rage of a mother whose children murder and maim one another. In her fury a storm brewed, crashing down with all her might on those who slighted life itself, drowning those who perished were absorbed into her ocean’s body, soothed by the tender Love in her heart. Those distant children, pale and dead to the song of life, she punished with the fury of a mother scorned.

When those first death ships to make the full passage docked on the shores of the distant America’s in a place known as ‘Igbo Landing’, it was Yemoja who called out for Ogunmila. Ogunmila reached down and blessed the enslaved children aboard the boat with a piece of their all-seeing vision, allowing the shackled ones to see the horrors that awaited them. When their dear brothers pulled the Igbo people from the ships, they turned and walked en masse into Yemoja’s deep sea, prefering to drown in chains than to live in bondage. Yemoja welcomed them, took them back into the ocean-womb of all life; gently rocked them to an eternal slumber in her waves, transported them to peace with her currents.

When this was done, Yemoja kicked her indigo tail, swam far, far through Okun’s deep sea, weaving as she went, searching for a place of rest in which to recover, a place barren of the life she had birthed. Finding herself in the frozen sea at the tip of the world, finally alone, she settled and wept; surrounding herself with her salty tears.

Yemoja wept for an age and an instant. The sound of her cries calling out across the ocean’s depths, awakening her brother-sister* Olokun from his/her* revere.

*Why are you crying sister-self?* Olokun asked.

*For I love all my children and evil has set a mark on their hearts.* Yemoja answered.

*Cruelty is contained in infinite potential. Would it not be wiser to simply leave your children to themselves? Let this life you have created be as it will. With so many children, are not the lives you touch merely a drop in the ocean?* Olokun asked.

*No brother-sister, they are the ocean in the drop. While I may not be able to rescue every starfish,* drying in the sand, on a beach of thousands; *my act of love makes all the difference to each life that persists. Kindness is contained alongside cruelty within life’s infinite potential.* Yemoja answered.

So the world came to be, in an age and an instant.

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*While at times Olokun is male other times he/she is female, multiple gender forms are used to describe the deity due to the many descendant forms of worship and gender fluidity. Myths inaccurate, the story is intended to illustrate the potential Olokun and stories of her birthed. Finding herself in the frozen sea at the tip of the world, finally alone, she settled, wept; surrounding herself with her salty tears.*

---

Hear the melodic melancholic euphoric chimes of the wind and the sea
Dramatically dancing around each other in ordered disorder

For Not everything has to be something profound
Not every life has to seem so extreme
Some can just be gentle

You don’t have to push yourself into the ground
You don’t have to be in a feverous frenzied fervor
With ridiculously resplendent turgescence

Take a step back and remember what it was like to be sound
Barefoot in the dirt
Drifting in the ocean
Floating in the breeze
Speaking with no one around
I only had an abstract understanding of the word when it titled a lecture given to my class during my first year: Burnout. It was introduced to us as a bad phenomenon or an occasional accident of the weak and undisciplined mind. Burnout is the natural other side of empathy; the two exist together, light and darkness, an inextricable duality. The idea that the solution to physician burnout is increased resilience of the individual, which is a notion that has been creeping upon us since I started medical school and my classmates throughout our training thus far, is based on flawed logic. We do not need to increase our individual resilience, our system is actually telling us that we need to increase the emotional distance between ourselves and the human lives we have promised to care for. What sort of sick humor is this, that in the face of stark human suffering of a magnitude often unimaginable to us, the preferred response is to look away, to focus on our next task? What sort of idealized apathy, that if we feel any fraction of that pain, really feel it and let it affect our human souls, then this means we are weak? That the exemplar is not a more open heart, but a closed-off one.

What we need isn’t more lectures about increasing our resilience. What we need is more humility in the face of our own humanity. Being a human person caring for the lives of others is not easy, neat, or tidy, and sometimes it is so very hard that it brings us to our knees. What we need is for being brought to our knees to be okay. It’s not bad. It doesn’t mean we are weak or less competent. It means we are still human.

THE OTHER SIDE OF EMPATHY

Haven Nisley, MS4

I was encouraged to let the work affect me less. In selection processes for medical schools and residency programs, one of the most desired characteristics across the board is empathy. Empathy is so highly valued that it has even been proposed, based on research, that medical schools should incorporate a scoring system for empathy into their admissions processes. It is clear that our power structures within the field of medicine wish to recruit people with high degrees of empathy into our profession. These power structures certainly desire the “good” part of empathy, the one that they can proudly observe, in a videoed patient simulation exercise, slowing the cadence of the voice, maintaining eye contact, touching a hand to connect. Empathy is not this simple, though, and purporting otherwise is naïve at best and unfair destroy. It means we are weak or less competent. It means we need is for being brought to their knees with the burden of these terabytes of trauma, metric tons of loss and pain.

Our power structures do not seem to want this messy and painful other side of the empathy coin. They do not want the side that breaks down crying in the stairwell, wasting precious time that could be spent writing progress notes because I’ve just helped a warm and gentle woman with terrible lungs celebrate what will be her last birthday. Nor the side that can’t hold a conversation because in my mind play the anguished sobs of a mother whose daughter has just been taken away. I only had an abstract understanding of the word when it titled a lecture given to my class during my first year: Burnout. It was introduced to us as a bad phenomenon or an occasional accident of the weak and undisciplined mind. Burnout is the natural other side of empathy; the two exist together, light and darkness, an inextricable duality. The idea that the solution to physician burnout is increased resilience of the individual, which is a notion that has been creeping upon us since I started medical school and my classmates throughout our training thus far, is based on flawed logic. We do not need to increase our individual resilience, our system is actually telling us that we need to increase the emotional distance between ourselves and the human lives we have promised to care for. What sort of sick humor is this, that in the face of stark human suffering of a magnitude often unimaginable to us, the preferred response is to look away, to focus on our next task? What sort of idealized apathy, that if we feel any fraction of that pain, really feel it and let it affect our human souls, then this means we are weak? That the exemplar is not a more open heart, but a closed-off one.

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THE LAST ENEMY: AN H&P

Marian Sagoe, MS4

S:
I go about the day
Frantically building a better fortress
Myself its own sacrifice, a Babylonian throne
Paper bills to fill my belly
A glass of sand to quench my thirst

O:
Then I’m in a sterile room
A polite voice reciting evidence
That my heartbeats are numbered
And my dreams are so easily null and void
If my life is not in my power
Was it ever mine at all?
The paper bills leach their poison and the acid creeps
up my throat
The sand becomes crusting hardened mud in my belly

A:
You sit down in front of me
You and I agree to ignore that you’re pretty young
That you’ve never borne a child, lost a husband or a
job-then-insurance
Been touched in that ugly way and shared meals with
That evil hand at Thanksgiving dinners
Reached for food to soothe the wound
Foreclosed on a home and slept in your car in your
neighbor’s curbside until his wife found out
Was incontinent in said car in a Walmart lot after a
bad can of corn
Not corn. Cancer.

P:
I am suddenly a child again
Orphaned and placed with you in the same minute
My shoulders quiver at the sudden vulnerability
My breath shutters at the regrets stored
For such a time as this
I was always hungry, I muse
Now that my appetite is lost
This stomach has become a sepulcher
For the me-before-you, dried paper and mud

I nod
When you ask if I understand
And shake my head
When you ask if I have any questions
But do you understand? Don’t you have more
important questions?

Progress Note:
In the morning you and I agree to ignore that I despise you
And can’t look at you in the eye
And resent feeling so utterly at your mercy
That you’ve got a paper in your hand, a list
Barely suppressed the harried lilt to your questions
But you come back, sans list
You sit down and look me in the eye
And you share your process with me as the person-not-the-orphan
There is time to open the grave and you and I look on it unflinchingly

I’m going to get another shot, another day
I’ll forgo the sand, drink living water
The Last Enemy
Will have to come for me another day